Haunted

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by Anonymous

Summary

Still recovering from their fight with Dolarhyde, Will and Hannibal escape to New Orleans with Chiyoh's help. But Will is still struggling to accept Hannibal and his own darkness, something that Hannibal has every intention of helping him overcome...

And At Most, I'm Sleeping All These Demons Away

The sun was just beginning to crest over the horizon, bathing the room in a bright golden blaze, when Will Graham woke with a start.

Though it hadn't risen far, the light was already overwhelming, and had Will screwing his eyes closed again before they could fully open. He wanted to go back to sleep, but the air was cold where it grazed his bare skin, puckering his flesh under its icy touch. He shivered, and drew his knees up to his chest in a vain attempt to shield himself from the chill. He must have kicked the blankets off sometime during the night, he realized belatedly. But rather than open his eyes again to be blinded by the light, and rather than grope hopelessly around him for the covers, Will instead buried his face in his pillow with a groan, willing himself to drift off again.

When something soft brushed against him, he jumped, jerking around to find Hannibal draping the comforter over him. He smiled faintly, almost reassuringly.

"Shh. It's only me," He murmured. "Go back to sleep, Will."

Too tired to argue, Will nodded hazily and burrowed back down under the warmth of the duvet. Hannibal tucked the blanket tightly around him, and his eyes fluttered shut. He felt Hannibal squeeze his shoulder in parting before he silently moved away again, and Will knew no more.

"This is a mistake."

"Yes, William, you've made your feelings on the matter perfectly clear." Hannibal informed him blithely from where he lay draped across the backseat of the car. Will shot him a glare over his shoulder.

"It is." He insisted. "You said we were leaving the country."

"And we are. But as I'm sure you understand, Will, these things take time."

"We don't have time!" Will snapped. "We've wasted enough time already! Jack will-"

"I think Jack has far more pressing concerns than us at the moment." Hannibal interrupted. "In fact, I don't think he's looking for us at all."

"More pressing concerns?!" Will echoed incredulously. "Have you met Jack? You and I are his only concern right now!"

"Oh, of that, I have no doubt." Hannibal said, and he sounded almost gleeful at the thought. "But if you recall, it was Jack who authorized my transfer, despite the risks involved. And now, because of his decision, multiple law enforcement officers are dead, a notorious serial killer is at large, and a former-FBI-special-agent-turned-civilian is missing. There's going to be an inquiry, and while it's ongoing, Jack will be suspended from duty. Jack's not looking for us, Will."

"But the FBI still is." Will persisted.

"Yes. And I take comfort in the fact that they will no doubt assign our case to someone who doesn't know us the way Jack does." Hannibal countered. "Someone who won't consider this personal."

"It doesn't matter who they assign. It's still the FBI. It's their job to find people - even a trainee could do it."

"And even a trainee has enough sense to check the security cameras at the house." Hannibal said carelessly. "When the FBI sees the fight, and you pulling us both over the side of the cliff, they will no doubt assume the worst."

"The FBI assuming the worst is them assuming we're still alive." Will fumed. "They're not going to stop looking until they find us."

"Maybe. But I doubt they will be looking too hard. This is incredibly embarrassing for the FBI. It would be in their best interest to assure the public that I am dead and you are a hero. With or without any physical evidence."

"But-"

"Will." Hannibal said firmly, opening his eyes at long last to fix Will beneath his dark gaze. "It is extremely unlikely we would have survived that fall. And even if we did, we would not have lasted long with injuries such as ours. Not unless, we had help, and the FBI has no reason to suspect we did." He smirked. "Curious, Will, that you knew Chiyoh was nearby, despite the time and distance that separated you. Tell me - how did you know? Because I doubt that either you or the FBI kept tabs on her after my arrest. Or that you would even be able to if you tried - she's quite adept at disappearing when she wants to."

Will felt his mouth go dry at his words, and he kept his gaze strictly forward as Hannibal's smoke-like voice washed over him.

"I suppose it doesn't matter." He continued airily. "However you knew, it was thanks to your quick thinking that we were able to escape as easily as we did. I owe you so much, Will. My freedom, my life, the chance to begin again...I hope you know I fully intend to make it up to you."

From the corner of his eye, Will could see Chiyoh's grip tighten on the steering wheel, her knuckles shockingly white against the black leather. Will grit his teeth in frustration, and his cheek twinged in protest.

"Don't be glib." He muttered. "It doesn't suit you."

"Nor does worrying needlessly suit you." Hannibal replied. "And yet, you continue to embrace fear. Tell me, Will, do you refuse peace because you don't want it or because you don't believe you deserve it?"

It felt deliberately and unbearably cruel, and Will had turned away from him then, pressing his aching jaw against the cool surface of his window. "Whatever chance of peace I had was lost the moment I met you."

Tit for tat. An eye for an eye. Even Steven, as he had once said. Hannibal had hurt him, so Will hurt him back. Wasn't that the nature of their relationship? To trade verbal and emotional blows the same way boxers would trade physical ones? Or the way lovers would exchange a kiss? What a depressing analogy that was.

Behind him, Hannibal was quiet for a long time.

"I disagree." He eventually said.

"Yeah, I'm sure you do." Will scoffed.

Chiyoh said something then in Japanese, her tone biting, and Hannibal chuckled.

"No, Chiyoh, you may not." He said cheerfully. "I much prefer him conscious - he's far more engaging that way." She muttered something else, ignoring Will as he edged further away from her, and again Hannibal responded in English. "I'm sure you'll learn to appreciate it eventually. He can be quite charming, in his own way."

Will was horrifed to feel the blush that came bubbling up to the surface of his skin at these words, and he quickly ducked his face so that neither Hannibal (currently lying horizontal behind him) nor Chiyoh (who had not spared him a glance from the moment she first showed up and whom he doubted gave two fucks about him one way or another) could see.

It wasn't until they crossed the border that Will spoke again.

"Why New Orleans?" He asked, gazing miserably at the words 'Welcome to Louisiana' as they rolled by. "Of all the places you could have gone, why did you choose here?"
"I was curious." Hannibal told him. "I wanted to see where you grew up."

"I grew up all over, Hannibal." Will reminded him with a sigh.

"Yes, but New Orleans was where your parents met, was it not? Where you were born? The place your father returned to so many times whenever he had the chance?" He paused then, as if unsure whether or not to proceed. "And if I remember correctly, it's also where your father is buried?"

"Yes." Will said shortly. As if Hannibal was incapable of remembering anything incorrectly.

"A place that you chose for him." Hannibal pointed out.

"I was living there when he died." Will said. "It seemed like the most convenient option."

"And why were you living in New Orleans, Will?" Hannibal persisted.

"I was working."

"For the New Orleans police." Hannibal said lightly, as if he had only just recalled that fact. "There are thousands of police departments across the United States, Will. You could have joined any of them and yet you chose New Orleans - why?"

"We were living in New Orleans when I graduated high school." Will ground out. "I wanted a steady job and they were hiring."

Hannibal hummed. "So you took the job because it was there? Are all your decisions the product of convenience, Will? I somehow doubt that. I think New Orleans has far more significance for you than you're willing to admit."

"And God forbid I have anything important in my life that isn't you." Will said flatly. "Is that what this is about? Are you going to punish me by destroying one of the few things that I care about? Take away one of the last things I have that's still mine?"

"Not at all, my dear Will," Hannibal assured him, almost kindly. "It's a part of you, it's important to you, and therefore, it's important to me. Besides," He said, brightening suddenly. "I think it would be quite therapeutic for you, to return to the place where you began and see how far you've come."

"I can hardly wait." Will said sarcastically. "Given how well your last therapy sessions ended for me."

"If past experience is the basis we're using to predict future outcomes, then you have every reason to believe it will be nothing short of a success."

"Me being incarcerated and gutted is your definition of success?"

"Did both those things not set you free, Will?" Hannibal asked him. "Or am I wrong? Are you still denying the darkness that lives in you? Still holding yourself back?"

"...I'm not so sure we'll ever know." He admitted at last.

"Well, I for one believe we're to find out." Hannibal said, satisfaction fairly dripping from his words. "Whether you want to or not."

The house was beautiful, an elegant white cottage framed by wide columns that rose with serene dignity from amidst the Louisiana marshes. Will looked one way and then another, and saw nothing but miles and miles of gently swaying grass and cattails, punctuated occasionally by the broad oaks that lined the winding, lonely road they'd followed from the city. If he squinted, and shaded his eyes, he thought he could still see the New Orleans skyline that blotted the horizon.

The door opened behind him, and Will turned in time to see Hannibal ease himself gingerly out of the backseat.

"A true Southern belle," He said. He seemed inordinately pleased, beaming up at the house, despite the fact that he was slumped against the car. "Don't you agree, Will?"

"It's very impressive." Will said slowly, looking back at him uncertainly. "It's just so..."

When Hannibal told him he had a house in New Orleans, Will had pictured something obnoxiously grand and opulent. Something flashy in the Garden District perhaps, or a stylish downtown loft. But this...

"It's so isolated." Will said at last. Hannibal turned to him then, and Will frowned at how unnaturally pale his face was, the faint sheen of sweat across his brow.

"You'd prefer it wasn't?" Hannibal asked.

"It just doesn't seem like you." Will said.

"No." Hannibal agreed. "But I thought it seemed like you."

For a moment, Will was too shocked to speak. "You bought this house for me?"

"I bought it with you in mind." Hannibal corrected him. His voice sounded rougher than usual.

"Wh-" Will sputtered, staring at him. "What do you mean?"

Hannibal straightened, and as soon as he did, what little color he had in his pinched face drained suddenly away. He stumbled, but before Will could react, Chiyoh swooped forward, pulling Hannibal's arm over her shoulder. He hung there limply, panting, his other arm wrapped tight around his waist. Alarmed, Will took a small, unsure step forward, hands half-raised to help, but then Chiyoh's cold, dark eyes flickered up to meet his, and Will found himself pinned helplessly in place. For a while the two of them stood glaring at one another, neither moving an inch and silently daring the other to break first. It was only when Hannibal groaned, sagging slightly against her, that Chiyoh finally turned away.

"Come." She said softly. "We must get you inside."

Will followed silently behind Chiyoh as she helped Hannibal up the porch, step by agonizing step, and across the threshold of the house.

"I'm sorry I can't give you a proper tour of the house, Will." Hannibal called back to him through gritted teeth. "I trust you can manage on our own until I recover?"

"I'm sure I'll survive." Will assured him sarcastically.

Chiyoh guided them silently down the hall, past a comfortable sitting room and through the kitchen to the master suite. When they arrived, Will hovered anxiously in the doorway as Chiyoh gently lowered Hannibal to the bed. He was still very pale, his hair matted with sweat and his breathing heavy and harsh. Chiyoh leaned over him, shielding him from view as she checked his half-healed wound, the two of them speaking quietly to one another for several minutes before she straightened again. Will watched as Chiyoh finally turned away from Hannibal, her hand lingering on his, and felt a sudden, unexpected stab of jealously at the sight.

"Follow me." She said, her voice was clipped as she brushed past him into the hall, and her steps were quick and sure as she led him back the way they'd come. She didn't say a word, and neither did Will, even when they reached the staircase that she had ignored earlier and began to climb. He felt strangely detached from what was happening, almost like he didn't care where they were going or what would happen next, and when Chiyoh came to an abrupt stop in front of a closed door at the top of the stairs, he nearly bowled her over.

"This is your room." She said, giving him an unimpressed look. "And mine is down the hall."

That got his attention.

"You're staying?" He asked, looking over at her sharply.

"I am."

"For how long?"

"As long as I'm needed."

Her face was like the surface of a lake - not so much as a ripple of emotion crossed her features as she spoke, but beneath the placid surface were dark and treacherous depths. Will knew that at best she distrusted him, and at worse, she hated him - he could feel it radiating off of her like waves pounding the shore, could feel it bleeding into his own subconscious, and he felt his lip curl in contempt before he could stop himself, before he could remind himself that these emotions he felt weren't his, but hers.

"You think I'm going to kill him."

"I think you'll certainly try." She said with a Sphinx-like smile that reminded him so much of Hannibal. "Though given how unsuccessful you've been in the past, I'm not so sure I'm really needed here at all."

Will knew the flare of hatred he felt then was his own.

"Good night, Chiyoh." He said pointedly, resisting the urge to roll his eyes as he turned away and disappeared into his room. When he was finally alone, the door firmly shut between him and the impossible situation he'd found himself in, Will felt like he could breathe for the first time in days.

But the air felt thin, as if there wasn't enough. Every breath he took was agony.

Will Graham couldn't sleep.

He tossed from one side to the other, and the more he moved the tighter his blankets twisted around him, binding him in place. Impatient, he kicked them off, shivered violently in their absence, and then yanked them back on. Immediately he began sweat. With a groan, he closed his eyes, forced himself to draw a long, slow breath, and then another.

It was so quiet. It was so quiet that the silence echoed, and Will squirmed under its impossible weight. He hadn't heard a single sound since he'd laid down - not so much as the creaking of a floorboard, or the groaning of the house as it settled. There was no roar of an approaching plane or the distant, lonely whistle of a passing train. There wasn't even the chirping of crickets or the croaking of bullfrogs to keep him company so late at night.

What he wouldn't give for some soft noise, some quiet reassurance that he wasn't alone. Will huffed, but he wanted to scream, to shatter the stillness so completely that it could never be put back together again. He'd gladly cut himself on jagged shards every day if it meant he wouldn't have to be alone any more.

Will stared up at the watery streak of moonlight smeared across his ceiling, and the stars that dotted the night sky.

'I looked up at the night sky there...I wondered if you could see it, too. I wondered if our stars were the same,' He found himself thinking. It seemed so long ago that he had said that, a an entire lifetime ago...

...I believe some of our stars will always be the same.

He thought about Hannibal. About him lying alone in the darkness and the silence downstairs, and himself and Chiyoh so far away and out of reach. If he needed them in the middle of the night, would they be able to hear him if he called? If something was wrong, how would they know? Will wondered if he would feel it when Hannibal finally died, if he would feel his loss as acutely as if he'd lost a limb, some diseased part of him forcibly cut out. He was sure he would, but he didn't know if it would be agony or relief that followed.

...Can't live with him...can't live without him...

He sat up suddenly. He needed to see Hannibal, to see for himself that he was all right, to reassure himself that he was still there. He had just swung one leg off the bed, set one foot on the ice cold floor, when he realized what he was doing and stopped. He sank back against the pillows, feeling empty and adrift.

He wasn't sure how long he sat there. He refused to look at the clock, refused himself the frustration of watching time tick ruthlessly on and the knowledge that the night would soon be leaving without him. Instead, his aching eyes watched the slow movement of the moon across the sky...

He must have drifted off at some point, because the next thing he knew, he was blinking up the ceiling, trying to remember what was happening, when a small whisper of sound caught his attention.
He turned, and to his surprise, saw a petite figure at his wardrobe, rummaging through its contents. Will frowned, squinting at the shadowy form. It was too dark to see, the moonlight just catching the edge of the figure's silhouette, but he was sure it was a woman.

"Chiyoh?" He mumbled, wondering why he hadn't heard her come in. "What are you doing?"

She went very, very still. So eerily still that for a moment Will wondered if maybe he had imagined the whole thing, if maybe he had still been half-asleep when he first saw her, or if she was just a trick of the low light. He shifted slightly, trying to get a better look.

No, she was definitely there. Why wasn't she answering him? Will felt his skin prickle uneasily.

"Chiyoh?" He tried again, his heart fluttering anxiously in his chest. "Is something wrong?"

He sat up, and when he did, he caught sight of the lazy waves cascading past her shoulders and down her back.

Not Chiyoh, he realized, stomach lurching violently. His hand flew to the hunting knife he'd stashed under his pillow, and the moment he touched the blade, the woman let loose a low, manic cackle that made the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end.

Will fumbled for the light, fingers scrambling against the switch, and when he finally got it, and light flooded the room -

There was no one there.

Will blinked, pulse galloping wildly in his veins, staring at his very clearly empty room, his shut wardrobe. He shook his head and dragged his shaking hand down his face.

'It was a dream.' He told himself firmly, trying to ignore the ripple of unease that slithered down his spine. He set the knife down on his bedside table. 'It was a dream, it was a dream, it doesn't mean anything, it was only a dream. My name is Will Graham. It's 3:14 in the morning and I'm in New Orleans, Louisiana.'

But no matter how many times he told himself that there was nothing there, that it wasn't real, the more his eyes seemed drawn to the spot, the harder it was to look away.

It had been so long since he'd had a dream like that. He had almost forgotten what they were like. He remembered the horror, the smell and itch of fear, and the feeling of sweat-soaked sheets. But looking back on them, they felt almost...whimsical. There were so different then. He was so different then, so much younger, it seemed to him now, so much more trusting and afraid.

He wondered if he would ever be able to think back on that time and not feel some pang of grief for who he had once been and the knowledge that that man was gone and never coming back. Yes, he mourned himself and the innocence he'd lost. But mostly he mourned what Hannibal had once been to him.

Or at least, what Will had once believed him to be.

He found his thoughts turning inevitably to Hannibal again. It seemed they always did, always would. And the harder he tried not to think about him, the more he did. To forget was to remember, and every resistance ended in surrender. Because to save himself from Hannibal was to kill himself at the same time, and the longer he went without air the more his lungs burned for it.

A vicious cycle. An endless loop. A rat running as fast as it could in its wheel and going nowhere.

'Why fight it?' Some small, dark part of him whispered. 'You tried once, and for so long. How did that work out for you? Aren't you tired of fighting all the time?'

Yes. More than he cared to admit.

He didn't stop himself this time when he rose from the bed. Let his feet carry him through the darkened house, and they delivered him swiftly and surely to the closed double doors of Hannibal's room.

They opened easily at his touch, almost as if they were waiting for him, and Will slipped quietly into the darkness inside.

Hannibal must have drawn the curtains, he realized as he crept cautiously forward, his hands outstretched blindly in front of him. When his feet touched soft carpet, he knew he was close, and after a few more hesitant steps, his fingers touched the wooden footboard.

He made his way to the side of the bed. Though his eyes had adjusted slightly to the dark, he couldn't make out much beyond Hannibal's shadowy form, and even standing just a few feet away, Will couldn't hear him breathing. He shifted anxiously from one foot to the other.

'He's fine.' Will told himself. 'You know he's fine. Chiyoh wouldn't have left him alone if he wasn't fine.'

But still he couldn't bring himself to turn away.

'This is ridiculous.' He thought grumpily. 'You're being stupid. You came all the way down here and now you're just standing around in the dark. Either do something to make sure he's alright or leave.'

So, feeling incredibly foolish, Will reached out, and his fingers grazed something warm and firm -

Hannibal's hand shot forward, and seized Will's wirst in an iron, unrelenting grip. Will gasped, tried to pull himself free, but Hannibal only clamped down harder. Will felt his bones grind painfully together and groan under Hannibal's weight, and he couldn't help but yelp with pain and fear. And as soon he heard him, Hannibal's hold loosened, and Will quickly yanked his arm back.

"Will?" Hannibal's voice rang sharp and clear from the darkness. "Will, what are you doing? Did I hurt you?"

For a moment, Will couldn't speak, could only stand there panting, cradling his bruised arm.

"Will?" Hannibal said, gentler this time. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine." Will hissed back, bristling at his tone.

"Here, let me see-"

"No!" Will snapped, taking a quick step back. "Really, I'm fine."

Hannibal didn't push him, and he was glad.

"What are you doing?" He asked instead. "Is something wrong?"

Will opened his mouth to answer, then closed it again. Because what was he supposed to say? That he couldn't sleep? That he had been worried about Hannibal? That he'd had a bad dream, possibly a hallucination, and was feeling just the slightest bit freaked out by it? Was it even possible to explain what he was doing in Hannibal's room in the middle of the night without completely embarrassing himself in the process? He doubted it.

"Were you sleepwalking?" Hannibal asked when he didn't answer.

Will hesitated. He wondered if Hannibal was giving him an out. He wondered if Hannibal was setting a trap.

He decided it didn't really matter.

"Yeah." He said gruffly. "Yeah, I think I was."

"...I see." Hannibal said. There was a brief pause. "Will, I think it would be best if you spent the rest of the night here, with me."

"What?" Will sputtered, recoiling.

"I don't think it's wise for you to be alone. If you sleepwalk again, you might injure yourself somehow, or wander outside into the road or the marsh." Hannibal pointed out. Will heard the bedclothes rustle, the mattress creak as Hannibal shifted. "Come here."

"No," Will said, backing further away. "No, it's fine. I'm fine. I don't think I'll be able to sleep again, anyway. I'm probably just, I don't know, read for a bit. Sorry I woke you-"

"Will." Hannibal's voice, no more than a whisper, cut off Will's rambling as effectively as if it had been a shout. "Please. I won't be able to sleep tonight if I don't know that you're safe. For my sake, Will, lie down."

Will hesitated. He knew he should refuse. He knew he shouldn't submit to Hannibal any more than he already had, shouldn't let him see just how much power he had over him. Because Hannibal was greedy and merciless and hungry for Will, and would not hesitate to use whatever he could to manipulate him back into his grasp. His wrist throbbed, and Will was sure a bruise was already beginning to form.

He took a few shuffling steps forward and once he had climbed stiffly into bed, Hannibal wordlessly draped the covers over him.

They were only inches apart, but the distance felt far greater to Will, lying rigid and silent in the dark. His eyes darted uselessly back and forth, his ears strained to hear Hannibal's quiet breathing, and he wondered if Hannibal could somehow sense the anxious thrumming of his heart, the way a shark could sense a fish thrashing in distress.

He jumped when he felt Hannibal's finger trail lightly against the jagged scar on his cheek.

"Chiyoh neglected you far too much, I think." He said, sounding regretful. Will swallowed.

"She had more important things to worry about." He reminded him. "It's not like it was going to kill me."

"No." Hannibal agreed. Then he sighed, stroking the damaged flesh. "But I'm afraid it may cause you considerable pain, Will. Or else neurological damage of some other kind."

"I suffer from both those things already." Will quipped sarcastically, and Hannibal's hand pulled away. Will regretted the words, regretted them as soon as he had said them, but was too proud to take them back. He was relieved when Hannibal chuckled beside him, and felt himself relax, however slightly.

"You never answered my question." Will murmured after a while. Hannibal hummed beside him. "The house." He elaborated. "What did you mean when you said you bought it with me in mind?"

"Exactly that. I thought it would make you happy."

"No, you didn't. It was an open would you wanted to poke."

"You don't believe me?"

"I'm sure you can understand why."

"Would you believe me if I told you that everything you could ever want was just on the other side of fear? That you could have Paradise so long as you conquered Hell?" When Will didn't answer him, he sighed. "All I've ever wanted was for you to be happy, Will." Hannibal whispered. "Though you've insisted on fighting me every step of the way."

"And what about what you want, Hannibal?" Will asked him bitterly. "I somehow doubt you could ever really be happy here."

"I could be happy every day for the rest of my life, Will," Hannibal told him, "Just so long as I was near you."

"...Don't say things like that." Will snapped. "Please don't...don't lie, Hannibal. I can take almost everything else except that."

"I apologize if I offended you, Will. But I assure you, I'm not lying."

Will huffed in return, and they fell silent again for time. Will wondered if maybe Hannibal had fallen asleep, when he suddenly spoke again.

"You never answered my question either, Will. Why haven't you ever returned to New Orleans? Surely, it is important to you."

"Why didn't you ever return to Lithuania, Dr. Lector?" Will asked. He wondered if words alone could draw blood. "Surely, it was important to you."

"Because there was nothing left for me there." Hannibal answered simply. "And because it was too painful. I suspect it is the same for you." There was movement, and Will imagined Hannibal turning to face him. He wondered if Hannibal could see him as clearly as if it were day. "So tell me, Will. What happened here that hurt you so terribly?"

To answer honestly was to give Hannibal an advantage Will couldn't afford. To lie was even worse.

"Do you believe in ghosts, Dr. Lector?" Was all Will said. Hannibal considered his question for a while before he finally answered.

"Ghosts are born of regret, Will. And I have none."

Will felt something contract painfully at those words. "None at all?" He asked, trying to sound indifferent and falling miserably short.

"Well," Hannibal conceded, and Will felt one of his fingers curl lightly around his. "Maybe one or two." He squeezed gently, and Will could convince himself it was an apology. "Good night, Will."

"Good night, Hannibal."

The sun had risen higher when Will woke again, the light a little softer, a little more bearable, than it was before. He blinked sleepily up at the unfamiliar ceiling as memories of the night before began slowly trickling back to him, and when Will turned to find Hannibal's side of the bed cold and empty, he felt a pang of loneliness at the sight of the rumpled sheets. He hated the feeling, resented it.
He sat up and looked around the room, wincing when he caught sight of his reflection in the large mirror beside the bed. He had lost weight since the fight with Dolarhyde - the damage to his mouth and jaw made eating difficult and painful, and his clothes hung loosely, unflatteringly, from his frame. His eyes were dull and framed with bruise-like shadows, and the scar stood livid red against the hollow of his white cheek. He studied the man gazing back at him from the mirror, but no matter how long he looked, no matter how hard, Will didn't recognize him at all.

Through the cracked door, Will could hear Hannibal and Chiyoh talking quietly to one another in the kitchen, punctuated by the clatter of silverware and the sputtering rumble of coffee brewing. Will didn't really want to get up. He didn't want to face another day when he had already decided he was ready to die, only for the choice to be snatched away from him. He didn't want to face Hannibal without the cover of night, not when the daylight made everything a little too real and unforgiving. But he didn't like the idea of Hannibal and

Chiyoh alone together, discussing their situation without him, so, reluctantly, he pulled the duvet over his shoulders and slipped quietly from the room and down the hall.

He found them sitting side by side at the kitchen table, Chiyoh reclining in her chair, Hannibal leaning forward over the table on his elbows. They were both already fully dressed, Chiyoh's hair pulled into an elegant knot at the base of her skull, and they looked over sharply as Will came padding softly into the room.

"Ah, good morning, Will." Hannibal said with a smile.

"Morning." Will mumbled back, suddenly acutely aware that underneath the duvet he was wearing nothing but his boxers. Chiyoh's eyes flickered over him, and Will resisted the urge to try and flatten his tousled curls.

"Did you sleep well?" Hannibal asked, rising stiffly from his chair and crossing the short distance to the coffee maker.

"Um, yes." Will answered reluctantly, watching as he poured him a cup. It wasn't quite the truth, given how long he had spent tossing and turning, but it wasn't quite a lie either, considering how quickly he had fallen asleep once he'd found Hannibal, how deeply he'd slept at his side.

"I'm glad." Hannibal said. "I was worried if might be difficult for you."

Will accepted the coffee when Hannibal handed it to him, and swallowed a quick mouthful as if it were a shot of whiskey.

"Chiyoh has been kind enough to offer to pick up some supplies for us, Will." Hannibal informed him. "Is there anything in particular you would like her to get?"

"No. Thanks." Will said curtly, and kept his gaze fixed firmly away from her as she rose silently from the table. She ignored him as well and just as pointedly, instead turning her attention to Hannibal and saying something to him in Japanese.

"I'm sure we'll be fine." He assured her. "Thank you, Chiyoh."

She nodded politely, and a moment later she left. As soon as he heard the door close, Hannibal smirked.

"Still wary of Chiyoh, Will?" He asked, sounding amused.

"Did you forget that she once threw me off a moving train?" Will muttered, raising the steaming coffee mug to his lips once more.

"Hmm. I had hoped you would have forgiven her for that by now. After all, she did help me save your life, if you recall."

"I don't remember asking her to." Will snapped. "Or you, for that matter."

Hannibal inclined his head. "I will apologize to you for many things, Will." He said. "But never that. So don't ask me to."

"Please." Will sneered. "I won't ever ask you to apologize to me for anything. Because I know you'd never really mean it."

"Why would I?" Hannibal asked. "When everything I've done has brought us here?"

Will wanted to throw something. He wanted to scream. He wanted to cry. He wanted to hurt Hannibal and he wanted Hannibal to hurt him more. But instead he stood up and moved to the tall window that overlooked the surrounding countryside, trying to put as much distance between himself and Hannibal as possible without leaving the room. Because leaving felt like giving up, and Will wasn't ready to surrender to Hannibal just yet.

A thick fog had rolled in with the dawn, and hung, heavy and billowing, over the land, concealing the earth under its smoky folds. Behind him, Will heard Hannibal sigh.

"I am sorry, Will." He said. "Not for what I've done, but for the hurt you've felt because of it. It was never my intention for you to suffer so much."

"Yeah, right." Will muttered. "You've enjoyed every minute of it."

"I have enjoyed every moment with you. Suffering or otherwise." He carried his own empty mug to the sink. Rinsed it out a few times under the running water. "I want things to be different between us now, Will." He confessed softly, setting the clean mug aside. "I want to be able to trust you. And I want you to trust me."

"You lie easier than you breathe, Hannibal." Will said flatly, glaring at him. "How am I supposed to believe anything you say?"

"I'm willing to put the past behind us, Will, and forgive the lies you've told me if it means we can start over." Hannibal said. "Perhaps you can do the same for me."

Will looked away. He had trusted Hannibal once before, and he wasn't sure he could agree to something like that again. Not just yet. It was still too soon. So he took another sip of coffee to avoid answering, gazing out across the wilderness that rolled endlessly on like the sea, when movement suddenly caught his eye.

A young buck deer, crowned with twig-like antlers, was picking its way delicately across the marsh, its long, spindly legs arching high over the gently swaying grass. Every now and then it would stop, lower its head and inspect something hidden in the mist. Will watched its progress as it crept steadily closer, wondering why it still had its antlers when it should have shed them weeks ago, when it suddenly stopped. Its small, triangular head turned very slowly, almost deliberately so, until its large black eyes met Will's...

Will jumped when Hannibal appeared suddenly and silently beside him, his hand alighting on Will's shoulder like a bird.

"What are you looking at?" He asked, and though his tone was light, Will could see his dark eyes were tight with worry.

Will frowned at him, and had just turned back around to point out the buck, when he suddenly stopped.

The little deer was gone, the fields beyond the house empty. He blinked, looking one way and then another, wondering how it could have disappeared so quickly, but decided that it was probably closer than it seemed, lingering someone in the mist, just beyond sight.

"Will?"

"Nothing." He said after a moment. "Nothing at all."

But Your Ghost

Chapter Notes

> This chapter was going to be longer, but for the sake of my sanity, I decided to divide it into two parts.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Will finally finished his coffee, Hannibal took the empty mug from him and rinsed it in the sink.

"I don't expect Chiyoh to be back for a few hours." Hannibal mused as he carefully dried the mug with a towel. "Some of the things I asked her to pick up can be difficult to come by."

"Nothing she can find in a morgue?" Will drawled from across the room. Hannibal's lips quirked in what may have been amusement, but what could have been disapproval.

"Not quite as easy as that, I'm afraid." He said.

"And what are you and I supposed to do until she gets back?"

"I had planned to use this time to organize the house for our stay."

"Am I supposed to help with that?"

Hannibal chuckled at his complete and utter lack of enthusiasm.

"No. As I'm sure you're aware, I'm very particular about the way I keep my house, and I think preparation will go much faster if I just did it myself." Even as he spoke, Hannibal was moving about the kitchen, opening various cabinets and inspecting their contents.

"And how long do you plan on us being here?" He asked as he watched his progress.

"Not long." Hannibal assured him as he began to empty the drawers. "A few months at most."

"And where were you planning on going next?"

There was a pause, and if Will didn't know any better, he would say Hannibal almost looked shy. "It would be easiest to escape across the Mexican border." He eventually said. "And once we had crossed, I thought we would continue on to Argentina."

"Argentina?"

"Yes. It is a beautiful country, Will. I think you would like it there. But if you're opposed, I think Cuba could be a good alternative as well."

"Because of their poor relations with the States?" Will guessed, and couldn't help the touch of sarcasm that colored his tone.

"Exactly." Hannibal beamed. "I believe their willingness to cooperate with the FBI would be extremely unlikely." He looked over at Will. "Unless of course, you have somewhere else in mind?"

Will fell silent. He had assumed that he and Hannibal would be together somewhere, but he had never given the details much thought. He tried to picture what it would be like, living in Cuba under warm sunshine and surrounded by color, free at last and separated from their pasts by the wide blue sea...but he found the image stained with blood and lies, distrust and shadows. He glanced over and found Hannibal watching him expectantly.

"You know you won't be able to wear a three piece suit in Cuba, right?" Was what Will said to avoid answering. Hannibal smiled faintly.

"I'm sure I'll manage." He said as he turned back to the cabinets. From one of the larger ones, he withdrew a stand mixer, a food processor, and another contraption Will didn't recognize, and set them neatly on the counter. "As long as you're happy, Will."

"Bold of you to assume I could ever be happy with you." Will muttered.

"I think the only person who believes you'll never be happy is you." Hannibal had moved on from emptying the cupboards and was now laying out an impressive collection of polished knives. Watching Hannibal move with such fluid ease around the kitchen, his surgeon's hands, confident and sure, as he inspected each knife, his deft pianist's fingers as they drifted delicately over the blades, the Chesapeake Ripper's possessive grip of each handle, Will was reminded of the advantage Hannibal had over him in virtually every way, and he suppressed a shudder when Hannibal suddenly looked up and met his gaze. "Not because you're incapable of it." Hannibal continued, his eyes cold and hard. "But because you won't allow yourself to be." He cocked his head. "So tell me, Will: what would make you happy?"

"The constant mind games stopping would be a nice start."

"This isn't a mind game, Will." Hannibal said with a faint edge of frustration.

"Hmm." Will hummed, ignoring the way his heart was pounding against his ribs, his shaking hands. "That sounds exactly like the kind of thing someone playing a mind game would say."

Hannibal heaved a long-suffering sigh, his eyes rolling heavenward. "I am not forcing you to do anything, Will." He reminded him slowly. "I won't keep you here, if this isn't where you want to be. I won't make you come anywhere with me you don't want to go. I won't demand anything from you that you're not willing or ready to give. But this is something you need to decide, and it's something you need to decide for yourself: what is it you want?"

Will glared at him. "Don't you mean, what is it that *you* want and what you want me to *think* I want?"

"No, we're not doing this. Not this time." Hannibal snarled suddenly, rounding the kitchen island and striding quickly towards Will. The look on his face had Will scrambling away, and he found himself backed into a corner, but before he could even think to move, Hannibal had closed the space between them, and was looming over him, his dead eyes and cruel mouth inches from Will's. Will panted, and Hannibal stared coldly back. "No more avoiding, Will. No more deflecting." He didn't shout - he never did - and maybe if he had, the effect wouldn't have been nearly so chilling. "Now tell me: what is it you want, Will?"

He said it so softly, almost tenderly, and as he did, Hannibal reached out, cupping Will's face in his hand…

Will was used to the feeling of other people's emotions drowning out his own, their thoughts and desires burrowing into his psyche like insidious, parasitic worms, but with Hannibal, he had only ever felt vague stirrings of feeling. In Hannibal's presence, it was quiet, peaceful, the endless cacophony of deafening white noise reduced to a mere whisper. And Will understood Hannibal, in a vague kind of way, but never with the haunting, suffocating clarity he felt with other people, and only when looking backwards. He couldn't predict Hannibal the way he could everyone else. He couldn't know what he would do next, and it was this, this unpredictability of Hannibal, that made Will fear him.

But seeing him now, crowded so close, his larger frame towering over Will's, and his hand pressed against his cheek…

Will had seen this before. He knew what happened next. He felt his thundering heart begin to slow. Because violence was something he could expect from Hannibal. It was something he understood, and understood well.

Maybe even craved…

Will straightened. Whatever terror he may have felt a moment before was now dead, and he met Hannibal's gaze evenly. Will thought he saw something like excitement flicker across Hannibal’s face, but it was gone just as quickly as it had appeared.

"I want you to stop lying to me, Dr. Lecter." Will said at last, the words as cold and clear as ice.

"I have been nothing but honest with you since we've arrived." Hannibal replied.

"Twisting the truth is not honesty."

"And what truths have I twisted, Will?" Hannibal asked him.

"Only the ones you haven't said." Will answered. "Lies of omission are still lies, Hannibal."

Hannibal's lips curled into a smirk, and he took a slow, deliberate step impossibly closer to Will.

"You hesitate to choose me," Hannibal finally said. "Because to choose me is to draw a permanent line in the sand with who you once were. With Jack Crawford and all he represents. If you choose me, you can never go back to who you once were, what you had before. You know that, and it terrifies you. Whereas I am far more forgiving. You know how much I want you, how long I've been waiting for you. That no matter how many times you reject and betray me, I will always be willing to welcome you back."

His thumb began to stroke slowly back and forth across Will's cheek.

"I will not force you to choose me, Will, because it would be a vulgar, hollow victory. And I have no desire to manipulate you into choosing me, because I don't need to. You want to choose me. You wouldn't be here if you didn't. All you need to do is take the final step." He leaned forward, so that his forehead brushed against Will's. "And when you finally do, it will be all the more beautiful. Because you will have done it of your own free will, without my influence. In the end, Will, it will be your decision. I will ensure it...Because that is what I want."

Will left the kitchen shaking, desperate to put some distance between himself and Hannibal, and staggered dazedly down the hall and up the stairs. His ears were ringing so loudly that every other noise seemed muted - the comforter that hung from his shoulders swishing silently as he moved on weak and trembling legs, the pounding of his heart more of a sensation than an actual sound. He didn't think, he didn't feel, and it wasn't until he reached his room that Will finally stopped, and the shock of what had happened finally began to wear off. He eyed his door with trepidation, his thoughts turning from the horror of what had just happened downstairs to the horror of what had happened the night before. He could still hear that eerie laugh as though it never stopped, his blood curdling at the memory alone, and he spent several minutes hovering uneasily outside his door, trying to convince himself that it had only been a dream, and nothing more. That there was nothing waiting for him just beyond the wooden barrier.

That it wasn't real.

'You've spent years hunting America's most wanted.' He reminded himself impatiently. 'You've come so close to dying so many times now that you've stopped keeping count. You know the Devil better than you know yourself. Are you really so scared of one bad dream?'

Yes, if he was being completely honest with himself. Because something about that shadowy suggestion of a person terrified him in ways he couldn't quite explain. Something about that nightmare felt different from the countless others he had suffered over the years. It meant something, he was sure of it, but what exactly, he didn't know, and he wasn't sure he wanted to.

But Will was rarely honest with himself. And he saw no reason to change that now. So, forcefully shoving whatever misgivings he had aside, he pushed the door open and stepped inside his empty, waiting room.

It was so ordinary. So unlike anything he ever would have expected from Hannibal. The shiplapped walls were painted a soft and cheerful white, striking against the cold black metal

of his bed frame and the thick, expensive sheets, which were still rumpled from his midnight flight the night before. The night stand and wardrobe were a matching set of pale wood, and hanging on the opposite wall was an ink painting of two koi fish circling one another gracefully. It didn't seem like Hannibal at all. In fact, it seemed like…him. Like his old farmhouse back in Wolf Trap. Looking around the room, Will swallowed thickly, wondering why Hannibal had designed it that way, what he was trying to accomplish…

His attention drifted to the wardrobe, standing utterly unremarkable in the cold daylight and impossible to ignore.

The more he thought about it, the stranger the dream seemed to him. Will knew most dreams didn't make much sense, but the one he'd had last night seemed especially odd. Though he hadn't been able to see her very well, there was something vaguely familiar about the woman from his nightmare, but nothing that made Will think he knew her somehow. So if she wasn't someone he knew, who was she supposed to be? What did she mean? And why had she been digging through his closet? What had she been looking for? Was there something Will's subconscious knew? Something it was trying to tell him?

Cautiously, as if he half-expected her to come leaping out at him, Will lifted a hand and pulled the wardrobe door open.

All he found inside were clothes - jeans, sweaters, and flannel shirts stacked neatly on built-in shelves, expensive dress shirts and pressed slacks hanging carefully on velvet hangers, sneakers, boots, Italian leather oxfords and loafers lined with irritating precision along the floor. Will found a box of cufflinks in one drawer, a collection of designer watches in another, and socks and underwear in the third. With each expensive piece he picked up, every article he found in his size, Will felt himself grow more and more overwhelmed at the absurdity of it all, the obvious lengths Hannibal had gone to ensure Will had everything he could possibly need during their stay.

It was only when he had emptied most of the cabinet that Will finally noticed something peculiar about it - it wasn't nearly as deep on the inside as it appeared to be from the outside.

Will blinked, puzzled, and reached inside once more, feeling the walls, the corners, trying to understand the discrepancy. It wasn't until he accidently knocked one of his knuckles against the back wall and it echoed hollowly that he realized there must be a secret compartment hidden behind it. Will quickly pulled out the remaining clothes, and once the wardrobe was

completely empty, began to run his hands along the back surface, looking for a notch, a hinge, anything that seemed even slightly out of place, but no matter how much he prodded, no matter how carefully he felt, the wall remained stubbornly fixed and smooth.

Frowning, Will stepped back again. He was beginning to wonder if perhaps the hidden compartment was accessed from the outside of the wardrobe instead of the inside, and was just turning away to test his theory when he saw something move from the corner of his eye.

He looked up…

…and immediately scrambled back, colliding with the closet.

"GYAHH!"

"Hi, Will. Remember me?"

Beverly. Beverly Katz was sitting on his bed, glaring at him. Will stared at her, blinked once, long and hard, but when he opened his eyes, she was still there. She raised a single, perfect eyebrow at him.

"Problem?" She asked sarcastically.

"You're not real." Will said, more to himself than to her. He closed his eyes again, willing her to vanish.

"Obviously not, considering, you know, the fact that I've been dead for a few years now." Beverly said. "Hey, remind me again why that is?"

"This is...sleep deprivation." Will assured himself, ignoring her. "Or stress...or maybe Hannibal slipped something in my coffee-"

"Or maybe," Beverly said slowly. "This is just you losing your mind."

"No." Will said forcefully, shaking his head. "No, I'm not crazy-"

"Are you sure? 'Cause it certainly seems that way to me."

"-this isn't real." Will said again. He buried his face in his hands, rubbed his eyes so hard he saw starbursts behind his closed lids. "This is a dream. It's just a dream and I'm gonna wake up any second now. Come on, wake up, wake up-"

"This isn't a dream, Will." Beverly told him. "You're not gonna wake up, not from this. The faster you accept that, the better."

"Go away." Will begged her. "Please, just go away."

"I'm not going anywhere." She said firmly. "At least, not until you hear what I have to say."

"What do you want?" Will groaned, finally raising his head to look at her. She looked so real, her edges so sharp and her voice so clear. She looked exactly like how Will remembered her, with her glossy black hair falling over her shoulders and dressed in the leather jacket she had loved so much.

"What do I want?" Beverly repeated, staring at him as if she couldn't believe what he had just said. "What do you mean, 'what do I want?'! I want to know what the fuck you're doing, Will! Do you realize what's going on?! Do you understand what you're doing?! Because from where I'm standing it looks like you're playing house with the man who destroyed your life, murdered almost everyone you ever cared about, and tried to kill you on multiple occasions! Or am I wrong?"

"I am not 'playing house' with Hannibal Lecter." Will spat, disgusted by what it implied. “Don’t say that.”

"You know I'm a projection of your subconscious, right?" Beverly asked him dryly. "Like those are literally your words, not mine. Because I don't exist. And why is that? Oh yeah, because Hannibal Lecter killed me!"

"What am I supposed to do?" Will hissed back at her. "I need him! I can't stay in America, not when the FBI is still looking for us, and he’s already promised me a way out!"

"And you think that won’t come with a price? Or that he's even going to let you live? After everything you've done? Don't be stupid, Will. He'd kill you in an instant to save himself and he'd kill you slowly just for his own pleasure. Just look at what he did to me!"

"No, this is different.” Will muttered. “You were a threat. You would have gone to Jack. You would have ruined everything. He had to kill you. He doesn’t have to kill me. He doesn’t want to.”

"You don’t think so?” Beverly asked. She sounded skeptical. “What makes you so sure?”

Could he daily feel a stab of hunger for you and find nourishment at the sight of you? Yes…

"Because.” Will said slowly. “Because he loves me."

Beverly laughed, loud and cruel. “Loves you?!” She scoffed. “He doesn’t love you, Will! He isn't capable of loving anything!”

“That’s not true.” Will reminded her quietly.

Because Hannibal had loved someone once, hadn’t he? That was precisely the problem - he had loved her so much that losing her had rendered him incapable of loving anything else. Or

so it seemed. Because maybe, just maybe, there was still some shard of humanity left in Hannibal, some part of him that could still love, however twisted it might be.

“Fine.” Beverly said, impatient. “But even if he did love you, so what? After everything he's done, it's not like you love him too, right?"

Will remained silent.

" *Right* ?"

"I-I don't know." He said.

"You can't lie to me, Will. I'm you." Beverly reminded him. "You don't love him. I don't know what you'd call what you feel for him, but it isn't love. And you know it. So tell me again - what exactly are you doing? Are you waiting around because you're hoping it will turn into love?"

"No!"

"Then what? Are you going to kill him?"

"I-" Will shot her a desperate look. "You know I can't."

"Yes you can." Beverly said. "You have to."

"No, Bev, I can't!"

"Why not?"

Will didn't answer her. He didn't need to. Like she had said, she already knew why.

Beverly huffed at him. "You know what I think? And by me, I mean you? I think you're in denial. I think you don't know what you want. And I think if you don't figure it out quick, you're gonna get yourself killed." She cocked her head. "Or maybe that's what this is about. Maybe that's exactly what you're hoping for?"

"Stop it, Beverly." Will pleaded.

"It is, isn't it?" Beverly pushed. "You wanted to die that night, you were ready, and he took it from you. Maybe you're hoping he'll give it back to you."

Will sank slowly to the floor, hugging his knees to his chest. "What am I supposed to do?" He asked her hopelessly. "I can't resist him. And I can't beat him. I've only got one option."

"No, you don't." Beverly whispered, crouching down in front him. "You can beat him, Will. You can. In fact I think you're the only one who can. But you need to be smart about it. Be patient. Watch and wait. Gather as much information you can, use every advantage you can get, and when you have a shot, take it. Don't hesitate. And whatever you do, don't let him see it coming. You know what will happen if he does."

Will nodded slowly. She was right - he did know. He understood Hannibal better than anyone else could ever hope or want. He had known his dark desires as if they were his own. And he had seen first hand exactly what the Chesapeake Ripper was capable of. There were still some nights he woke to the buzzing of the bone saw, the sensation of thick, hot blood cascading down his front...

No. He couldn't believe anything Hannibal said. He couldn't trust anything he did.

Beverly had been watching him closely, and whether she sensed his resolve or saw it written plainly on his face, Will wasn't sure, but she suddenly clapped her hands together, her face grim.

“Okay.” She said, looking toward his open door, as if she expected Hannibal to appear at any moment. “First thing’s first: get dressed. And then you should probably work on memorizing the layout of the house. And you need to familiarize yourself with the surrounding property, just in case-” She trailed off when she turned back to Will and found he hadn’t moved. "What?" She asked, frowning at him. “What are you waiting for?”

"Do you mind?" He snapped, gesturing at her vaguely.

"Okay, you do understand that I'm in your head, right? Like I'm you and you're me, and I know what you look like naked?"

"You're just...very convincing."

Beverly smiled. "Well. You were always known for your impressive imagination." She leaned forward, her long fingers ghosting over his. “Now use it.”

Will blinked then, and she was gone. He glanced around his undeniably empty room, and almost wished she would come back, if only so he wouldn't feel so incredibly, overwhelmingly alone.

The mist still hadn't cleared by the time Will stepped outside, and hung so thick and heavy that he couldn't see more than fifteen feet in front of him, no matter how hard he squinted and strained his eyes. Overhead, the sky was the pale silver of an oyster shell and dotted with dense clouds that promised rain. Will stood gazing out at the shrouded, empty countryside, looking first one way and then the other but saw nothing but miles and miles of rolling fog. With a sigh, he began to walk.

The earth crunched wetly beneath his boots as he circled around to the back of the house, and the grass was so tall that it brushed against his fingertips, the blades whispering softly to one another when the cold wind swept over them, stirring them to dance and sway. Will shivered in the breeze, stuck his hands in his pockets, and carefully studied the ground in front of him.

He had been hoping to find the little deer's tracks in the soft Louisiana loam, but no matter how hard he looked, he couldn't find them - the earth was smooth and undisturbed in every direction he looked. Puzzled, Will stuck one foot forward, pressed it lightly to the dirt, and when he lifted it again found a perfect impression of his boot. He frowned and glanced back at the house, trying to judge the distance, and then stepped a few paces further back. He went slowly, practically glowering down at the earth, and still he could find no trace that the deer had even been there at all - no hoofprints, no tufts of fur left behind, no bent or broken blades of grass to mark its path.

Will finally gave up and turned away, great billows of fog washing over him like waves on the sea. He ignored the ache in his jaw, his throbbing shoulders, as he wandered aimlessly over the fields and through the mist, heading west, trying to map out the land as he went. He knew they were close to the water - he could hear it, however faintly, rushing and lapping against the shore, but just where it was coming from, how far away it was, he couldn't say. Maybe half a mile from the house, at most? It was hard to tell with the way sounds seemed to carry in the stillness, resounding far louder than they normally would, and as he moved farther and farther from the house, the thicker the fog seemed to grow and the more disoriented he became.

Eventually Will was forced to stop, realizing he had strayed much further than he thought when he turned to look back at the house and could just barely make out its shadow looming in the distance. He stood looking at the faraway speck for a long time, and it felt as if it were calling out to him, as if some invisible force was pulling him back.

‘Where are you going? Come back,’ It seemed to say. ‘Come back to me, back to where you belong. Where else would you go? What else is there for you out there? Without me? Come back…come back…”

He resisted for as long as he could, and when he eventually gave in and began the long, slow trek across the marsh, it felt inevitable. Because he had tried to leave it all behind once before, and found that he couldn’t. He couldn’t just walk away, he realized that now. He was bound to Hannibal, so deeply entwined with him, so tightly tied to him, that it would be impossible to separate from him without losing pieces of himself in the process. To even try would be suicide. So really, where else would he go, where else could he go, but back?

Will hated it. He hated that he was so dependent on Hannibal, he hated the power Hannibal had over him, and the fact that he had so little control over anything that had already happened and everything that still had yet to come. Despite Hannibal insisting otherwise, he didn't feel like he was in control of anything, least of all himself. Instead, he felt small and helpless, a scream lost in the wind, a boat battered on storm-tossed seas, something to be torn apart and swallowed by a force so much stronger and more powerful than he could ever hope to be.

'Oh God, thy sea is so great and my boat so small.' He found himself thinking bitterly as he began to pick his way back to the house, wanting nothing more than to burn it to the ground until there was nothing left. Until the smoke had cleared and the wind had carried the ashes somewhere far away. Until everything that they were, everything that they had, was nothing more than the memory of a memory. Maybe then, Will would finally be free. Maybe then, he would find peace.

'I have no need to manipulate you…because I don't need to. You want to choose me…you wouldn't be here if you didn't…'

Will turned these words over and over again in his head as he walked, trying to find some hidden meaning that he had missed before, something he might have overlooked in the moment they were said. He didn't think Hannibal was lying to him, not completely, but he was sure there was far more to what Hannibal wanted, what he intended, than he was letting on. But exactly what that was, Will couldn't say. Because this was a game. A game which only Hannibal knew how to play and one whose rules were ever changing, Will's chance of winning forever shifting just a little farther out of reach with every passing turn...

He reached the house much sooner than he would have liked, and though Will didn't dare stray any further from the house than he already had, not when he didn't know the area, not when he couldn't see more than a few feet in front of him, and definitely not with the river nearby, he didn't want to go inside just yet - it was just another reminder of the advantage Hannibal had over him.

So rather than return, Will ignored the house and continued past it to the other side. He was expecting to find more open fields obscured by fog and not much else, but was surprised to find a small detached garage instead.

He stopped short, studying it suspiciously. God only knew what could possibly be inside, but with Hannibal, it could be almost anything…and certainly nothing good. Will wasn't sure he wanted to know. But as Beverly had already said, as he already knew, he needed every advantage he could get, and to understand exactly what he was up against.

Will threw a quick glance over his shoulder, straining to see the house through the fog. Though he saw no sign of Hannibal anywhere, no shadows that lingered in the darkened windows, no distant shape that stole through the haze, he couldn't shake the feeling that he was being watched. Casting the house one last suspicious look, Will reluctantly turned back to the garage.

He wasn't surprised when he tried the door and found it firmly locked, but it still frustrated him. He pushed against it again halfheartedly, but did not try and force it open. Instead, Will stepped aside and, cupping a hand over his eyes, pressed himself to the nearest window, squinting into the darkness beyond. By the pale light that managed to filter through the dusty windows, Will could just make out the shape of a small truck half-hidden under a tarp, and beyond it, shelves stretching from floor to ceiling and lined with various tools and spare parts.

Will felt his pulse quicken at the sight, at what it meant.

No doubt Hannibal had the keys, both to the garage and the car, and no doubt he had them hidden carefully away, most likely on his person or somewhere in the house, somewhere that would be nearly impossible to find. But Will was sure he'd be able to find them eventually. He had months, after all, according to Hannibal.

Assuming, of course, he could survive that long.

Chapter End Notes

Hopefully part 2 will be done by next week. Once it's done, I might end up combining them like I originally intended.

The Ghost of You It Keeps Me Awake

Chapter Notes

Fuck it. Here's part 3.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

True to Hannibal's prediction, Chiyoh did not return until late that afternoon, just as the storm clouds gathered overhead finally began to break.

She had forbidden Hannibal from helping her, but said nothing when Will followed her out into the rain, and together the two of them worked silently side by side to haul everything inside. Though the sudden change in weather had made Will's jaw so stiff that he could barely speak and his shoulders groaned in protest each time he lifted a bag into his arms, he stubbornly ignored the pain, sprinting feverishly back and forth between the house and the car, grateful for the distraction, for something to do. When there was nothing left for them to unload, he trailed unwillingly after Chiyoh back into the house.

Inside, Hannibal was working on unwrapping the various packages, fanning them out across the enormous kitchen island - numerous meats wrapped in brown butcher paper, wheels and wedges of ridiculously expensive cheese, canvas bags stuffed with produce, cloth sacks of rice, flour, and sugar, beautifully blown bottles of oil and vinegar, tinkling glass jars of spices and herbs, wooden crates packed with wine.

Will stood watching silently from across the room, his arms folded over his shivering frame, and tried to squash his mounting anxiety at the sight of Hannibal, the Ripper, standing in a kitchen and surrounded by food once more.

"Thank you, Chiyoh. As always, you have been most helpful." He said, opening one of the crates of wine and lifting a delicate bottle up to inspect it. He smiled, pleased, and then looked over to Will and Chiyoh, still dripping in the doorway. "Why don't the two of you change out of your wet clothes," He suggested, his smile softening into something almost fond, "And I'll prepare dinner?"

Chiyoh nodded once, like a soldier receiving orders, then turned sharply on her heel and vanished up the stairs. Hannibal chuckled and then took a long, wickedly sharp chef's knife from the nearby block, holding it up so that it glinted in the light. Will's shudder was lost amidst his shivering.

Hannibal glanced over at him.

"Everything all right, Will?" He asked, and Will hated that he sounded so calm.

"Yes."

Hannibal frowned, however slightly. "You should dry off." He advised him. "You'll get sick."

"That's...a myth." Will managed through clenched teeth.

"I assure you it's not." Hannibal said smoothly. He had begun gathering different ingredients together, lifting them from the great pile on the counter and setting them aside.

"What are you making?" Will asked him, edging further into the kitchen as Hannibal began to clean the vegetables he'd assembled.

"I was thinking I would make katsudon and gyoza." He mused. "Something warm and comforting for such a miserable night. And a favorite of Chiyoh's, from what I remember."

"Sounds good." Will said without any real enthusiasm, and Hannibal smiled.

"Find anything interesting while you were exploring today, Will?" He asked then.

“Not really.”

“You certainly seemed interested in the garage when you found it.” Hannibal observed lightly, his dead eyes lifting to meet Will’s.

Will’s blood went cold. For a long moment he stared silently back, wondering what Hannibal was playing at, what he was trying to accomplish. Because Hannibal never said or did anything without purpose, he didn’t pry without reason, and Will doubted this was his attempt at casual conversation. But just exactly what it was, he wasn’t sure.

“Was I not supposed to find it?” Will eventually asked. Hannibal cocked an eyebrow at him.

“I don’t see how you couldn’t have,” He said slowly. “Seeing as it’s only a hundred feet from the house.”

Will eyed Hannibal suspiciously. “I saw the truck too.” He told him, if only just to see his reaction.

“I should hope so.” Was all Hannibal said. His long fingers were now curled around a plump, yellow onion, holding it in place as he began to slice it into delicate, bite-sized pieces. His hand moved with such ease and precision that he made it seem almost effortless. Will couldn't help but admire it...

...He couldn’t help but wonder what it would take for Hannibal to turn the blade on him…

...How quickly and finely he’d cut him to bits...

“Why didn’t you tell me you had another car?” Will asked.

“I’m sorry, Will.” Hannibal said, somewhat testily. “I’m afraid I’ve had other, more pressing things to worry about and it must have slipped my mind.”

“But what are you gonna use it for?”

“I had intended for us to drive it.” Hannibal informed him, his every word saturated with sarcasm. Will blinked.

“‘Us’?” He echoed disbelievingly. “You’d let me drive it?”

Hannibal’s hands finally stilled and he looked up at Will. It was impossible to tell what he was thinking as he studied him, and Will couldn’t help but shift nervously under his gaze. Then very slowly, Hannibal set the knife aside, and from his pocket, he withdrew a set of keys. He held them up without a word for Will to see and then very deliberately set them on the counter and slid them over toward Will.

“You may use it any time you like, Will.” He said, and Will frowned, looking from Hannibal, to the keys, and back again. Hannibal sighed. “My dear, I told you I have no intentions of keeping you prisoner here, and I meant it.” As he spoke, he picked up the knife again, and resumed as though he had never been interrupted. “I wish there was something I could do to make you believe that.” He said quietly, and he sounded almost sad.

Will’s frown only deepened at that, and he had just opened his mouth to reassure Hannibal that there was absolutely nothing he could do to convince him otherwise, when a sneeze erupted suddenly and without warning from him, swallowing the protest instantly. Hannibal gave another small sigh.

“Please, Will.” Hannibal said. “I must insist that you change into something warm and dry before you catch your death.”

“Pretty sure I already did.” Will sniffed, just to be petty.

Hannibal ignored him.

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Will lay stretched across his bed, staring miserably up at the ceiling and the shadows that played there, listening to the rain as it lashed relentlessly against his window. His stomach was growling angrily, demanding his attention, but it was easy to ignore compared to the pulsing ache that radiated sharply down his jaw. Will shifted, trying to get comfortable. In the distance, there was the faint rumble of thunder, and Will groaned at the sudden flare of pressure that followed. He closed his eyes and forced himself to draw a few shuddering breaths between his clenched teeth.

...In…

...Out…

His shoulders throbbed. His stomach churned. His cheek burned.

...In…

...Out…

He wondered how long the pain would last. If it would eventually fade long enough for him to fall asleep.

...In…

...Out…

...In...

He thought of the night ahead of him. The days ahead of him. The years ahead of him. Of the hundreds of storms he would be forced to endure for the rest of his life and the agony that was sure to follow.

In...Out...In...

His breaths were beginning to pick up, despite his every effort to keep them slow and deep.

In. Out. In. Out.

He thought about Hannibal, the life they would have together. About his hands wrapped possessively around his shoulders, his voice low and suggestive as he whispered in his ear. Impossible to ignore. Impossible to escape.

In. Out. In.

Because he would never let Will go. Just as Will could never let him go.

They were bound together, impossible to separate.

IN. OUT. IN.

And Hannibal would bend Will as he desired, consume him, mold him bit by bit, until slowly, so slowly that Will wouldn't even realize it was happening, he would lose himself to Hannibal.

And he would be powerless to stop it.

IN-OUT-IN-

“Will?”

Will opened his eyes with a strangled gasp, and jerked his head around to find Hannibal standing at his door, watching him. Will blinked blearily up at him through the overwhelming haze of pain and hunger.

“May I come in?” He asked softly. Will considered him for a moment, and then nodded stiffly. Hannibal took several measured steps closer, as though he were trying not to startle Will as he dragged himself upright with a wince. When he reached Will’s side, he sank slowly to the bed. For a long moment he was quiet, his dark eyes never once leaving Will’s face.

“You’re in pain.” He said at last. Will shrugged - there was no point in confirming or denying the obvious. Hannibal seemed to nod to himself, a barely perceptible motion, and then raised his hand. “May I?” He asked, reaching for him.

Will hesitated. Though he wanted to believe there was no possible way Hannibal could make the pain any worse than it already was, he knew that wasn’t true. Hannibal could make it infinitely worse if that was what he wanted - to even think otherwise was an insult to Hannibal and all he was capable of.

But Will was tired of fighting. Tired of resisting Hannibal when it was so pointless to even try. And maybe he wanted Hannibal to hurt him, if only so he could have one more reason to hate him, one more thing to keep him going for just a little longer. He nodded.

When Hannibal’s long fingers brushed against his cheek, Will couldn’t help but tense at the touch. Hannibal’s eyes flickered to find Will’s, searching them silently before he continued.

“You barely ate anything at dinner.” Hannibal murmured as he traced the sharp ridge of Will’s cheekbone, the deep hollow underneath. “You’re not eating enough, Will - you’re too thin.”

Will said nothing, avoiding Hannibal’s eyes as he proceeded to palpate along his cheek, feeling the rigid muscles as they convulsed and rippled just beneath the skin. It was only when he reached the joint that the pain suddenly exploded, and Will whimpered before he could stop himself.

He thought for sure it would send Hannibal into a frenzy. That he would dig his fingers deeper at the sound, scratch until he drew blood, twist until Will screamed. But to his surprise, Hannibal's hands stilled immediately. He waited for Will’s stuttering breaths to even out, and then he pressed the spot again, gently this time, massaging it until, little by little, the muscles slowly loosened and the pain began to fade. Will sighed against his palm.

“Better?” Hannibal asked him as he finally pulled away.

“Yeah.” Will said, cautiously raising a hand to feel the joint for himself. It still hurt, but it had been reduced from sharp and stabbing to a dull throbbing. Easy to ignore. He looked over at Hannibal. “Thanks.”

But Hannibal was now frowning, his eyes locked on Will’s uplifted arm, on the bruises that circled his wrist like a bracelet.

“You’re welcome.” He said simply, before taking Will’s hand in his own. “Does it hurt?” He asked, sounding regretful as he prodded the abused flesh.

“No.”

Hannibal hummed, bending Will’s hand back and forth, and instructing him to flex his fingers.

“There’s no sprain.” He pronounced at last.

“I could have told you that.” Will huffed at him, and the shadow of a smile flickered briefly across Hannibal’s face before he grew serious again.

“I’m sorry, Will. Please believe me when I say I didn't mean to hurt you.”

“I know you didn’t.” Will assured him quietly. Hannibal ducked his head, and then, to Will’s surprise, pressed a quick kiss to Will’s fingers before releasing him again.

“Will you be going to bed soon?” Hannibal asked him then, as if nothing had happened. It took Will a moment to grasp what he was saying.

“Yeah.” He said, a bit breathlessly. “Yeah, probably.”

Hannibal nodded. He looked grim. “Will, there’s something I wanted to speak with you about.”

Something fluttered anxiously in Will’s chest. He swallowed thickly. “Okay.”

“Do you know if you’ve had any other recent experiences of sleepwalking?” Hannibal him. “Aside from last night?”

It took Will a moment to realize what he was talking about.

“Oh.” He said after a moment. “Um, no. No, not that I know of.”

“Are you sure? There was never a time when you woke up in a different place than where you fell asleep? Never a morning when something in your room seemed out of place?”

“No.” Will said, a little more firmly.

“What about feelings of fatigue?” Hannibal persisted, looking at him closely.

“No.”

“Nightmares?” Hannibal asked him quietly. “Hallucinations? Losing time?”

Will stiffened. He may have lied about his sleepwalking, but no way would he admit to seeing Beverly, or the ghostly woman from his nightmare. Not out loud, not to Hannibal, and definitely not to himself.

“You think the encephalitis is back.” He said quietly to avoid answering.

“You know there is always a possibility it might flare up again.” Hannibal reminded him.

“Yeah. And so what if it does?” Will asked, glaring at him.

“Will, this is important. If there’s something wrong, if there’s something you’re not telling me, you need to let me know so I can help you.”

“You mean help me like you did the last time?” Will snarled. Hannibal regarded him coldly.

“I was monitoring your condition very closely the entire time.” He said. “Everything was under control. You were never in any danger-”

“Bullshit!” Will shouted, scrambling up from the bed, desperate to put some distance between himself and Hannibal. “You had no way of knowing what would happen! What it would do to me! What it *did* do to me! I trusted you and you let me burn!”

“You know I can’t undo what I did, Will.” Hannibal said calmly. He too had risen from the bed and had taken a few steps closer to Will, his hands outstretched placatingly toward him. “I can’t go back and change anything.”

Will shook his head. “It doesn’t matter.” He hissed. “You’ve already told me you don’t regret anything you’ve done - even if you could undo what you did, you wouldn’t.”

“Perhaps not.” Hannibal agreed, inclining his head. “But I have no intention of letting it happen again.”

Will laughed, a bitter, mirthless sound that erupted loudly from him. “And just what would you do to stop it if it ever did come back, Doctor?” He asked sarcastically. “Take me to the nearest hospital and ask for an MRI and a plasmapheresis treatment? Just stroll right up to the front desk and tell them exactly what I need, based on your ‘expert opinion’? You wouldn’t even have to introduce yourself or anything, would you? They’d know exactly who you are. Or maybe you could just write me a prescription for steroids yourself. Not sure how you’d manage that with a revoked medical license but I’m sure you’d figure out something.”

The look on Hannibal’s face was terrifying, but Will ignored it. He chuckled lowly, shaking his head.

“Talk about irony.” He muttered. “You could’ve helped me before but you chose not to. And now that you want to, there’s not a damn thing you’ll ever be able to do to help me.”

Hannibal was still glaring at him. “I’d find a way to save you, Will.” He said. “I promise.”

Will scoffed. “Well, luckily for you, you don’t have to promise me anything. It’s not back. I’m fine.”

“Regardless.” Hannibal said coolly. “Until we know for sure, I think we should take certain precautions to ensure your safety.”

“Oh yeah? Like what?” Will asked him grumpily, crossing his arms.

“I would like for you to spend the nights with me, Will.” Hannibal said, clasping his arms behind his back. “That way, if you start sleepwalking again I’ll be able to stop you before you accidentally hurt yourself.”

“Pass.” Will spat.

“Very well.” Hannibal said primly. “If you are uncomfortable with that, the only other possible solution I can think of would be to lock you in your room each night.”

Will felt something ice cold sweep over him at those words, and he stared at Hannibal in horror.

“You said you wouldn’t keep me here.” He whispered. “That you wouldn’t force me to stay.”

“And I’m not. I’ll unlock your door in the morning.”

Will was shaking, but whether it was from terror or rage, he wasn’t sure. “You want to lock me in here like an animal?” He said “Like...like a…”

“Like an inmate?” Hannibal suggested serenely, and Will swore he never hated him more than in that moment. “I only want what’s best for you, Will. I’m trying to protect you.”

“For fuck’s sake, it happened *once* , Hannibal!”

“It’s not a risk I’m willing to take.” Hannibal said firmly.

“And those are the only two options you’re giving me?” Will sneered.

“It would seem so.” Hannibal’s lips curled into a smirk. “So which will you choose, Will?”

Will stared at him, hating him, his clenched fists trembling at his sides. If he just confessed and told Hannibal he hadn’t been sleepwalking, that he’d had a nightmare, that he had wanted, that he *needed* , to see Hannibal, he would have no reason to lock him up, or force them to share a bed...

But to reveal the truth, to admit how badly he needed him, was to surrender even more than he already had to Hannibal.

And Will couldn’t do that...

...Not yet.

Hannibal cocked an eyebrow at him, waiting patiently for his answer. Will scowled defiantly back.

“I guess I don't have a choice after all.” He said, shoving past Hannibal and collapsing back on his bed. Behind him, he heard Hannibal sigh.

“Good night, Will.”

Will listened to his footsteps as he left the room. As he quietly drew the door closed.

As the key scraped in the lock.

“I hate him.”

“No, you don’t.” Abigail murmured to him. “You know you don’t.”

“Yes, I do!” Will was choking. On rage, on tears he refused to let fall.

Beside him, Abigail lay with her hand tucked under her cheek, bathed in the light of the moon. She looked so beautiful. Whole. Perfect.

It hurt looking at her.

“I’m pretty sure they haven’t invented a word for what you feel for him.” She said with a sad little smile. Her wide blue eyes suddenly scrunched with pity. “You know he’s worried about you. He’s just trying to protect you.”

“Why are you here?” Will snapped at her. He didn't want to listen to himself defend Hannibal. He wanted hatred, outrage. “Why you? Why not Beverly?”

“Because it’s not Beverly you need right now.” Abigail told him. Will looked away.

“This is how it’s always gonna be, isn’t it?” He asked her quietly. “The rest of my life - always running, always fighting. Never knowing what's real and what's not.”

From the corner of his eye, he saw her raise her hand as if to grab his, and then seemed to remember it was pointless because she abruptly drew back. It was an awkward gesture, the kind of thing the real Abigail might have done. Will loved her all the more for it. He closed his eyes.

“...It’s not always gonna be this way.” Abigail assured him. “It might not seem like it now, but it’s going to be okay, Will.”

“You sound like Hannibal.” Will muttered back, and she huffed a small laugh back at him.

“It will be.” She insisted. “I promise.”

Chapter End Notes

Might be a while before I update again

My Friends Had You Figured Out, Yeah They Saw What's Inside of You

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The rain had finally stopped sometime after midnight, and the next morning dawned so bright, so impossible to ignore, it was hard to believe that such miserable weather could have existed only a few short hours before. Sunshine streamed through the open windows of Will's room, gradually filling it to the brim with warm, golden light. Will stood pressed against his bedroom wall, watching the sunlight as it slowly crept across the floor and up the walls. When it finally touched his face, he closed his eyes and released a soft sigh.

He didn't know how long he stood there, waiting. There wasn't a clock in his room, and the only assurance he had that time was moving was the steady rise of the sun. A few minutes or several hours could have passed when he finally heard the scrape of metal on metal, the telltale sound of a key being turned in a lock…

Will held his breath, watching as the door slowly opened, stopping a few mere centimeters away from his unmoving form. He didn't dare breathe as Hannibal stepped cautiously into his room. Will couldn't see him, but he could hear his footsteps as he moved slowly forward, could imagine his bewilderment at finding his room empty, the bed made.

"Will?" Hannibal called, and Will kicked the door away so that it swung closed with a loud bang.

Hannibal barely had time to react. He had only managed to turn around as Will tackled him to the bed with a snarl, pressing the blade of his hunting knife to his throat. Hannibal didn't seem shocked, or worried. He smirked up at Will with apparent amusement, and with just enough condescension that had Will bristling.

"Hello, Gorgeous."

“Shut up.” Will spat, and Hannibal grinned wolfishly at him. “Where are the keys?”

“Which ones, Will?”

“Stop playing with me!” Will snapped. “The keys to the truck!”

“I have them.” Hannibal assured him, his hands coming up to stroke Will’s hips in what may have been a calming gesture or a suggestive one. “Would you like me to get them for you?”

“What do you think?” Will asked him sarcastically.

“I think you’re breathtaking.” Hannibal sighed, gazing up at Will as if he were the sun. It was a look of such adoration and awe that for a moment, Will felt his resolve falter, felt his grip on the blade loosen ever so slightly, and the instant it did, Hannibal’s expression changed completely, hardening into something deadly and cold. “Perhaps I should fix that.”

It was the only warning Will had before Hannibal suddenly flipped him over, wrenching the knife from his hand and pinning him to the bed. Will thrashed wildly, uselessly, against his iron hold, stilling only when he felt the blade kiss his throat.

“Shh, shh, shh.” Hannibal cooed above him, as though he were a fussy child needing to be soothed. Will gasped when he felt the knife pierce his skin, and the warm bubble of blood that followed its bite. “None of that, now, darling.”

And though his voice was sickly sweet, his face was unnervingly blank, as if it were carved from wax - an imitation of human features without so much as a hint of true feeling. Will panted, staring up at him, the blood pooling in the hollows of his throat, and felt himself relax, however slightly.

Because Hannibal was only ever predictable when he was violent, and Will was pretty sure he knew what would happen next - Hannibal would cut his throat, the same way he'd cut Abigail's, straddling him in a perverse lover's embrace as he bled Will's life from his body. It would be poetic. It would be justice. It would be right. And maybe, it would be enough for Will to atone for everything he had done - for lying to Hannibal, for betraying Jack, for failing Abigail. For turning his back on everything he once stood for and for all the people who had died along the way because of him. Maybe this was the only way he could finally have peace…

He closed his eyes, and wondered if he would slip quietly into the stream one last time or if it would all come rushing in at once, dragging him ruthlessly down below the surface and into the depths. He knew it would hurt, but he hoped it would be quick…

Then the pressure on his neck suddenly loosened, and Will stiffened again, screwing his eyes tightly shut, expecting it to come plunging agonizingly back again-

But nothing happened. Moments passed and then minutes. Above him, Will felt Hannibal shift so that he was no longer draped across him, but sitting back on his heels. Will cautiously opened his eyes, and found Hannibal staring down at him, his head slightly cocked and his expression unreadable.

"What are you waiting for?" Will breathed. "Do it."

Hannibal scowled. And then, very slowly and with his usual feline grace, he climbed off Will and off the bed. Will sat up, bewildered, watching Hannibal as he straightened up, smoothing his rumpled shirt back into place.

"You really want to die so badly?" Hannibal hissed. "Fine, I won't stop you, if that's what you want. But don't expect me to do it for you, Will."

"I thought you wanted to kill me." Will snarled back. "You've already tried it only a dozen times before. I just figured it was a win-win for everyone."

"I would hardly consider it a 'win' for *me* , William." Hannibal sniffed.

“No, I guess you wouldn’t.” Will said quietly. “You never did like when I made my own choices, did you?”

Hannibal’s red rimmed eyes flashed. “How many times do I need to tell you that you are free to make your own choices?”

“Like I was last night?”

“I gave you a choice, and I respected your decision.”

“No, you gave me an ultimatum.”

“Did I?” Hannibal asked airily, fixing Will beneath his ruthless gaze. “And just what exactly did I threaten to do if you refused, Will?”

Will opened his mouth, closed it. He frowned, turning Hannibal’s words from the night before over and over in his head. He glanced uncertainly at Hannibal, who stared resolutely back.

“I never demanded you decide anything, Will. I didn’t force you to be locked inside your room - you chose to be.”

“It was either that or sleep with you!”

“But I never once said that you had to choose between one or the other.” Hannibal reminded him, raising an eyebrow. “If you had refused either of the options I suggested, I would have accepted it.” There was a brief pause as he let his words sink in. “I find it interesting, Will, that of all the things you could have chosen to do, you chose to cage yourself, and with such little protest.” He paused again, if only to ensure the final blow hurt all the more. “Why do you think that is?”

For a moment, Will couldn’t speak. He could only stare as the full weight of Hannibal’s words, of what he was saying, of what he had done, finally hit him. “You lied to me.” He eventually managed, hating how strangled his voice was, how pathetic the words were.

“When?” Hannibal asked, because if there was ever a chance to make Will suffer, he wouldn’t hesitate to take it. “At what point did I lie?”

“You didn’t tell me I didn't have to choose!” Will cried. “You made me think I had to!”

“Most choices are an illusion, Will.” Hannibal informed him. “You often have far more options than what you’re presented with. The sooner you learn that, the better.”

Will swiped at his eyes. “So it was a test, then.” He summarized bitterly.

“In a way, I suppose it was.” Hannibal said with an elegant roll of his shoulders. He was frowning again, but it was different now, more puzzled than vexed. “But why are you so hurt? I’ve tested you before, and often with much higher stakes and far worse consequences.”

“Because you said you were done playing games.” Will reminded him miserably. “And I was dumb enough to believe you.”

Hannibal sighed, and took a few steps closer to Will so that he could lay a hand on his shoulder.

“How many times have I told you that I will never force you to do something you don’t want to do?” He asked again, gently this time, bending down as if to catch Will’s eye, who refused to meet his gaze. “Perhaps I haven’t said it enough.” He mused. “In that case, I’ll remind you every hour if you need me to.” With a smirk, he leaned even closer, his lips brushing the soft shell of Will’s ear. “You have the chance to choose for yourself what you want, Will. Whatever you ultimately decide, I’ll honor that choice if it means making you happy.”

Will finally raised his head at that.

“Do you really mean that?” He croaked.

“I do.” Hannibal purred back.

“Then I want to leave.”

For a moment, Hannibal seemed to go completely still, as if he was surprised, but he recovered quickly.

“Of course. Where would you like us to go?”

“No, not us.” Will said, shaking his head. “Just me. I want to leave, Hannibal.”

Hannibal was quiet for a few seconds longer this time. “All right, Will. If that’s what you want, I won’t stop you.”

Will laughed mirthlessly. “But I can’t leave, can I? Not really. My face is on every news outlet in the country. I have nowhere else to go and even if I did, I have no way of getting there. I have five dollars to my name and the clothes on my back and absolutely no hope of crossing the border without getting caught. I can’t leave. No matter how badly I want to, I can’t. I’m stuck here. With you.” He chuckled again. “I guess it really is like you said - most choices are an illusion.”

Hannibal didn’t answer him. Instead, he went abruptly to Will’s wardrobe, which he opened without a word.

“What are you doing?” Will asked as he began to carefully remove the clothes that Will had tossed haphazardly inside.

Rather than answer him, Hannibal simply reached inside, so that his fingers brushed against the back wall of the closet. To Will's amazement, the secret compartment, the one he had tried so hard to find yesterday, sprang open under Hannibal's slight touch. He watched silently, as Hannibal retrieved a stack of documents and then brought them back to the bed for Will to inspect for himself.

"Birth certificate, social security number, driver's license, passport." He listed, laying them out one by one in front of Will. "And this is everything you need to access the bank account I set up for you. Here is the card. You just have to call this number to activate it." He took a small step back, away from Will, as if he were trying not to overwhelm him. "There's two hundred thousand dollars in the account." He said. "I know it's not much - I had originally intended it to be used strictly for emergencies - but it should be enough to last you until you can find somewhere new to start over."

Will blinked down at the papers spread before him. He reached out, touched the laminated edge of the driver's license and then picked it up, turning it this way and that in the light. It was good. Really good. It definitely would have fooled him if he hadn't known it was fake.

"'John Gray'?" He read aloud, looking over at Hannibal, who seemed to be smiling slightly. "Is that supposed to be a morality pun?"

"Yes. Forgive me my little joke, but I couldn't help myself." Hannibal said, his tone still painfully formal. "I knew you would never completely align yourself to my way of thinking - you've always been far more comfortable operating between shades of gray. I thought it was a fitting tribute."

"And 'John'?" Will asked, tilting the card so that the iridescent patterns stamped across the surface shone. "Just because it's so common?"

"Yes, partly." Hannibal's smile widened. "But mostly because John was always thought to be the most devoted of the disciples."

Will couldn't help it - he laughed. And when he realized what he was doing, he clamped a hand over his mouth in horror. Hannibal looked at him with pity. Or at least, with what pity

was supposed to look like.

“Try not to judge yourself too harshly for what you are, Will.” He said softly. “Not when you didn’t choose it for yourself.”

Will slowly shook his head. “You’re right, I didn’t get to choose what I am.” He agreed quietly through his fingers. “But who I choose to be in spite of that - I still have a say in that.”

Hannibal regarded him sadly. “It’s true you can learn to ignore your nature and your impulses.” He said after a moment. “Deny yourself and what you are. But at what cost, Will?”

“How about a life I can be proud of?”

“You mean a pale shadow of a life half lived.” Hannibal corrected him. “Of never knowing all you could be. Of never tasting freedom. Of the slow, agonizing death of your true self.” He tilted his head. “But perhaps you already knew what your sacrifice meant. Perhaps that is why you reject the idea of happiness so violently - because you’ve already chosen to forsake it.”

Will hung his head in answer, and Hannibal finally looked away, turning to study the painting of the koi fish on his wall.

“If that’s what you want,” He said at last, his eyes tracing the long graceful sweep of their entwined fins. “Then I can understand why you want to put as much distance between us as possible.”

“Because you don’t want me for who I am, not really. You want me to be like you. And I know you’ll never stop trying to make that happen.” Will said.

Hannibal shook his head. “Because I want you to be happy, Will. And how can you be when you’ve already convinced yourself that it’s impossible?”

Will heaved a sigh.

“...I don’t want this.” He said. “I never wanted any of this. I didn’t ask for it. All I’ve ever wanted was to be normal, and you...you took that from me.” He glanced over at Hannibal, who met his gaze evenly. “I could have been happy, or at least content, with the life I had built for myself. It wasn’t perfect but it was mine. It was mine. This isn’t mine. It’s yours.” He felt his eyes prickle dangerously. “What else are you going to take from me if I stay, Hannibal?”

Hannibal considered him. “You told me once that you feared not knowing who you are. Are you worried that if you stay, your greatest fear will become realized?”

Will hesitated, and then nodded. “Can you promise me it won’t?” He asked quietly.

He never saw Hannibal look so pained. “I’m sorry, Will. But I can’t promise you that.”

Will looked away, nodded again to show he understood.

Hannibal took a small and almost unsure step closer. He seemed to hesitate for a moment, and then he slowly extended his hand. Will eyed it warily before he took it. And as soon as he did, Hannibal dropped to his knees before him.

“I love you, Will.” He said. “Please believe that, if nothing else.”

It had been one thing to hear Bedelia confirm what Will had only begun to suspect. It was another thing to finally hear it from Hannibal himself. And Will had often wondered how it would feel to hear him say it. Would he feel anger? Joy? Relief? Disbelief? Fear?

He was surprised and disappointed when he felt nothing at all.

“No you don’t.” He said quietly, pulling his hand free from Hannibal’s. “This isn’t love, Hannibal. It never was.”

“It is.” Hannibal insisted, his dark eyes moving back and forth across Will’s face searching desperately for some small weakness he could exploit, some hint of uncertainty he could use, and finding none.

“Then prove it.” Was all Will said, his voice as icy as his gaze.

Hannibal’s reptilian eyes blinked once, long and slow, considering Will’s words, calculating his next move. When he suddenly pushed himself to his feet, Will couldn’t help but flinch away from him, expecting the worst.

But all Hannibal did next was pull a set of keys from his pocket, the same set he had shown Will the night before, which he then placed on Will’s nightstand. Easily within his reach.

“It’s registered in your name.” He said quietly. He wasn’t looking at Will anymore. In fact, he seemed to be making a point to avoid looking at him, as if he couldn’t bear to. “Your new name. It’s yours, Will. Do with it as you wish.”

And then he turned away. Took the few, short steps to Will’s door and pulled it open.

“Why are you doing this?” Will called after him, glaring at his retreating back. “What are you trying to do?”

Hannibal shrugged. “If you love something, you set it free.” He said simply. “I’m setting you free, Will.” There was a small pause before he spoke again. “Will you at least say goodbye before you go?” He asked, keeping his back firmly to Will.

“...I don’t know.” Will confessed. “I’m still not convinced this isn’t part of your game. How am I supposed to play if I don’t know what the rules are?”

Hannibal chuckled, but it was a sad, defeated, almost lonely sound. “Rules?” He echoed. “My dear, haven’t you realized yet? There are no rules - there never were.”

And without another word, without so much as a backward glance, he left.

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In the end, he left without saying goodbye. He didn’t trust Hannibal to not try and convince him to stay, and he didn’t trust himself to be strong enough to resist if he did.

Will found a suitcase under his bed and threw as many of the clothes in his wardrobe as he could fit before he stole quickly from his room and down the stairs, convinced that Hannibal would appear at any moment to either stop him or attack him -

But he never did. Neither Hannibal nor Chiyoh intervened with Will’s flight from the house. No one grabbed his shaking hands as they unlocked first the garage and then the truck. Not a soul was there to prevent him from backing the car out onto the open, waiting road. But as Will threw the car into drive, he couldn’t stop himself from glancing back at the house, and something jolted sharply inside him when he saw Hannibal watching from the window. He looked away before he could get a good glimpse of Hannibal’s face, terrified of what he’d find.

It was only once he was driving, only once he finally had his freedom that Will realized he didn’t know what he wanted to do, where he wanted to go.

Logically, he knew he should be heading west to Texas, and from there on to Mexico. Crossing the border was ridiculously easy - from what Will had learned during his time with the FBI, the Mexican officials often waved south-bound travelers through without even

checking their passports - and if Will had any sense at all, he should be trying to get as far away from Jack, from Hannibal, as fast as he possibly could.

But now that he finally could leave, Will found himself hesitating, and for reasons he couldn't quite explain.

It wasn't like he didn't know what to do - it was pretty much a straight shot from New Orleans to Texas on the I-10 West, and then south at the first chance he got. And it wasn't like he had any trouble finding his way there - because while Will didn't really consider anywhere to be his 'home', New Orleans was probably the closest thing he had to one, and even after so many years away, it felt like he had never left. Driving through downtown, it looked as if nothing had changed at all - everything was as he'd left it. He found the exit ramp to Baton Rouge exactly where he expected it to be and almost as soon as he started looking for it…and yet he couldn't bring himself to take it. He circled the city again. Found the sign a second time just as easily as he had the first time…and then passed it once more. Will smacked the steering wheel, frustrated with himself. Tried again. Failed again. Did it five more times before he finally gave up and started cruising aimlessly.

It took him a while to realize it wasn't entirely aimless and it certainly wasn't random - it was the same route he had driven night after night, day after day, an entire lifetime ago back when he was a beat cop for the NOPD. Will watched the familiar sights, the ones that felt so much like a part of him, roll by - the St. Louis Cathedral, the green and white awning of Cafe du Monde, the French Quarter, Bourbon Street, the Garden District - it was all here, exactly as he remembered it, not a single thing out of place. In fact, it seemed the only thing that had changed, the only thing that was different, that had no place here anymore, was him.

And suddenly Will wanted nothing more than to get as far from New Orleans, as far away from the memories of a life he could never have again, as he possibly could. He turned the truck around. Patiently navigated the busy streets back to the I-10 W exit...and still he couldn't bring himself to take it.

Will groaned. What was the *matter* with him?

"Can't live with him. Can't live without him." Bedelia supplied helpfully from the passenger seat. She sounded bored.

Will ignored her. She had appeared sometime around his third attempt at leaving the city, with both legs intact and a glass of chilled white wine in her hand, and she had remained mercifully silent ever since, sipping her drink leisurely and watching Will as if his presence annoyed her just as much as hers did him.

Bedelia then shifted slightly beside him. The wine remained unnaturally level in its glass. “Often, what we want and what we need are two completely different things.” She said serenely. “How wonderful it must be when the two are one in the same.”

“I do not want or *need* Hannibal Lecter.” Will snapped at her.

Bedelia had once said that when she saw weakness she felt the need to crush it, and she must have sensed it now, because she leaned slowly forward, her eyes locked on Will and her lips curling in a smirk. Though her cruelty could never overshadow Hannibal’s, there were times when it came close. “Then leave.” She said as if it were the simplest thing in the world, her voice no more than a whisper as she spoke.

With a snarl, Will slammed his fist against the radio dial. A deafening burst of static followed, but as far as he was concerned, anything was better than listening to his own mind betray him while wearing Bedelia’s face. She watched him as he fiddled with buttons, her glass raised to the soft edge of her taunting mouth, and when the jaunty tune of “Sweet Caroline” suddenly came on, her smile widened and Will winced.

Because his daddy loved this song. Whenever they were driving (and they were always driving it seemed to Will - to a new job, to another doctor’s appointment, to a second opinion, to more psychiatric evaluations) and this song would come on, his daddy’s eyes would suddenly light up and he’d sit up a little straighter.

“It’s your mama’s song, boy!” He’d say, grinning widely as he cranked the volume up, his fingers drumming on the steering wheel to the beat.

That was the only time he ever sounded happy when he talked about her, and any other time Will would bring her up, ask about the woman he never knew and couldn’t remember, his father would sigh and Will would swallow back the tears that weren’t his.

It hurt them both whenever Will asked about her, and eventually, he learned to stop, despite how much he hungered for that mysterious, distant figure who had disappeared before he had the chance to know her, the woman who had carried him, shaped him, birthed him, the woman his father had loved so much, missed so much, that to even say her name out loud was nothing short of desecration. So yes, though he was starving for whatever scrap of information he could get, he learned to ignore the pain of not knowing. He learned it was better not to ask at all. And, every now and then, he would be rewarded with some small tidbit about her that would help ease the hunger, if only for a little while.

Once, when he was four, he had found a picture of her in his daddy's wallet. He had never seen her before, but he knew who she was as soon as he saw her, and had been so captivated by the sight of her that he hadn't even heard his father's approach.

"What'cha got there, Will?" And Will had jerked around guiltily, expecting a whooping, but his daddy had only wrapped his sunburnt arms around him and pulled him into his lap.

"Ain't she pretty?" He had said, and Will nodded. Because even if she wasn't, she was still his mama, and that made her the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. His daddy squeezed him gently. "Thank God you take after her." He said, nuzzling the side of Will's face before tucking the photo away again.

At the time, Will had swelled with pride at those words. It wasn't until he was older that Will realized they might be more of a curse than a blessing.

"Any family history of mental illness?" The nurses would ask at each new appointment, and every time his father would shift uncomfortably, glancing over at Will, who, still starving, would stare unblinkingly back.

"Yeah." His daddy would admit quietly, so quietly that Will would have to strain to hear him. "Yeah, his mother..."

And every time, the moment he said "schizophrenia", as soon as he told them what she'd done, they would fly into a panic. And though his daddy assured them every time that they had already ruled it out with their last doctor, they would still insist on testing for it again.

“-no signs of it right now, but childhood schizophrenia is extremely rare.” The doctors would all say. “The typical age of onset for boys is the late teens to early twenties, and with his mother having it, we need to be on the lookout-“

Turning thirty should have been a relief, but it wasn’t. Because Will was a devoted believer in the Gospel According to Murphy, and if anyone could be guaranteed to develop schizophrenia well past what was typical, it was him.

…The fact that he was currently hallucinating the woman he had watched Hannibal kill only a week ago certainly wasn’t helping to reassure him otherwise.

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He hadn’t planned on driving past it. He hadn’t even been looking for it. But the sight of his old police station left Will longing unexpectedly for more half-forgotten pieces of himself, and he set out in search of more.

He found his high school next (at least the one he graduated from - he had attended a dozen other ones all scattered along the eastern coast). It was only a few blocks away from the station (easily within walking distance for a new graduate desperate for a steady paycheck and the chance to put down roots), and he almost didn’t recognize it when he first saw it - it had been remodeled since the last time he was there. He wondered if it had anything to do with Katrina or if the city was just trying to accommodate the growing population and the increased competition of newer, private schools. He decided it really didn’t matter.

The elementary school where he had started kindergarten was harder to find. Will’s memories of it were somewhat hazy, but he was pretty sure he and his daddy had been living in an apartment on the east side of town at the time. He never did find the school, but after a few tries Will managed to find the apartment building that had been his home for almost a year before his daddy had to take a new job in Mississippi.

Next he found the little shotgun house they had rented when he was eight. When he had lived there it had been painted white, but now it was a soft blue. Will liked it better the way it was before, the way he remembered it. When he said so, Bedelia huffed impatiently and took

another sip of her wine. And he supposed that was fair - it wasn't like him complaining would change anything.

Then was the apartment they'd had when he graduated. When they lived there, it had been in a bad part of town, (Will had been lulled to sleep every night by the white noise of gunshots and sirens - that was where he first got the idea to apply for the police), but now the graffiti had been scrubbed away, the debris cleared and the bullet holes patched. There was a cafe where there was once a liquor store and a boutique where there had been a laundromat. Luxury cars lined the street under hanging baskets filled with flowers. It didn't look at all like the neighborhood Will had once known - it looked like the sort of thing Will had pictured when Hannibal told him he had a place in New Orleans.

He stayed just long enough to know he had no reason to stay any longer. It wasn't his anymore. He didn't belong there.

There was just one more. One more place in New Orleans where Will could remember living - the one he'd loved the most.

He had been twelve when his daddy took a job at a boatyard for the summer. It wasn't the longest they'd ever stayed anywhere, but it was the only time Will had ever had the chance to really know a place and come to think of it as his. On the outskirts of town, near the shore of Lake Pontchartrain, that trailer park was the closest thing to a home that Will had known while growing up - long days in the sun, walking down to the lake with his fishing pole over his shoulder or following his daddy out to the docks to watch him work. Warm nights under the stars, listening to the crickets sing. Fireworks on the Fourth of July. He had been devastated when they left, but had hoped that one day they might go back.

They never did. Life had gotten in the way - a new job and scrambling to find a house. School, graduation, and work. His father's sudden death. A night gone wrong, a knife in his shoulder. An acceptance letter, a new opportunity, only a few days to move, relocate, again. Quantico. Jack. Hannibal…

A part of Will wondered if he shouldn't just leave the past as he remembered it - tinted rose. But he also knew he'd never forgive himself if he didn't see it one last time, if he never properly said goodbye to who he had once been. And as much as Will wished it was under different circumstances, he doubted he would ever have this chance again.

As he drove, something lifted inside him, fluttered hopefully at the thought of seeing his long-lost childhood home after all these years away.

Bedelia stared resolutely straight ahead, saying nothing. Will didn't understand why she was there, why she lingered, if she had no intention of speaking, and he somehow doubted asking would get him a straight answer, if any. So he ignored her the same way she ignored him, and allowed himself to be excited for the first time in a long time.

Where there had once been grass was now just mounds of freshly turned dirt, and where dozens of trailers had once stood was now just one mobile office. On the chain link fence that had been erected around the site was a sign that said 'Driscoll Construction Co.' and underneath it was another that demanded in neon orange letters, 'No trespassing'.

Will stood staring at the mounds of dirt, the office trailer, the signs feeling strangely empty at the sight. Bedelia was beside him, a silent witness, looking utterly ridiculous in virginal, saintly white, not a hair out of place as she surveyed the barren land with clinical disinterest. It was only when Will turned to leave that she finally spoke.

"The world seemed a bad and terrible place," She murmured as they stood shoulder to shoulder, she facing the wasteland of what was left of his past and he to the horizon. The sun was getting low. "All its denizens suspect. And I the lamb wandering through the valley of death with a bell around my neck."

Will considered her words, trying to understand what it was his own fractured mind was trying to tell him.

“Lambs are symbols of innocence.” He eventually replied. From the corner of his eye, he could see her looking at him. “Something to be sacrificed. Slaughtered.”

“Loss of innocence is something we all face.” She said. “It’s unavoidable.”

“I think my innocence was lost a long time ago, Bedelia.” Will said bitterly.

“No doubt.” She agreed. On the front of her dress a scarlet stain suddenly blossomed over her thigh. “I never said *you* were the lamb in this analogy.”

“And what is it I am?”

“I think you are a wolf in sheep’s clothing, who has lived so long among sheep that you’ve either convinced yourself you are one or have forgotten you are a wolf.”

“And who’s Hannibal in this analogy?” Will asked her, spitting venom. “My shepherd?”

Bedelia smiled wickedly. The bloodstain on her dress had reached the hem, and a few fat droplets fell spattering to the ground beneath her feet.

“...The wolf who howls in the distance.” She said. “Who reminds you what you truly are.” When Will didn’t answer her, she leaned in closer, her lips against his ear. “May God have mercy on those poor, unsuspecting lambs when you finally do remember.” She whispered.

Will shook and his eyes fell close as if to shut her out. When he eventually opened them again, he was alone.

The needle had been slipping closer and closer to ‘Empty’ on the fuel gauge all day, but Will couldn’t afford to ignore it for much longer.

He had known when he left that he would eventually need to stop for more gas. He had just thought he would be a lot farther from where he started, from Hannibal, when he finally did.

Will sighed. There wasn’t much to choose from on these lonely country roads, and he didn’t want to risk being recognized. But he was miles from anywhere worth being with a fuel tank that was nearly empty, and after driving for so long for so far without seeing anything but the road ahead and nothing but weeds and grass on either side, when he finally saw a gas station on the horizon, he immediately began to slow. Apparently, there were some situations when the options you were given were the only ones you had.

‘Beggars can’t be choosers’ was the phrase that came to mind as Will pulled up to the pump and saw, too late, the paper taped over the card reader.

‘Out of order. See cashier inside.’

Will rolled his eyes. As he climbed out of the car and began to make his way over to the station, he wondered what the likelihood was that he’d see it again on the ten o’clock news that night.

He wondered what the likelihood was that he’d see the story from behind bars.

Will ducked his head down when he reached the door, and when he did, he was surprised to see a thick layer of red brick dust spread over the threshold. He hesitated when he saw it. There was something about voodoo that had always made him a little uneasy, and while he didn’t necessarily believe in it, what little time he’d spent in New Orleans had instilled in him a healthy sense of respect for it, however reluctantly. Careful not to disturb the line, Will pushed against the door and stepped inside. A bell chimed overhead as he did.

He kept his head low and his face turned away from the security camera behind the register, and as he shuffled to the checkout counter, Will glanced nervously around from the corner of his eyes. For one wild moment, he thought he was alone, but then he caught sight of a woman in the far corner, stacking bags of chips on the shelves.

“Be wit’cha in jus’ a minute, honey!” She called to him from over her shoulder.

“Take your time.” Will croaked back. “I’m in no hurry.”

He looked around the shop while he waited for her to finish. Bottled water, beer, energy drinks in the refrigerators. Beef jerky, candy, pretzels on the shelves. Styrofoam cups and burnt coffee. A small stack of local newspapers that were several days old. Everything you’d expect from a small roadside gas station in the middle of nowhere, nothing out of the ordinary. Nothing except maybe the small cross nailed to the wall behind the counter…

Will was pulled from his musing by the sound of soft footsteps. When he turned, he saw that the woman had finished restocking the shelves and was coming over to help him, straightening her bright orange head scarf as she did.

“Hey there, honey. What’cha need?” She asked him, settling herself behind the counter. The name tag on her shirt said ‘Nadine’.

“Just gas.”

“And how much ya want?”

Will took out two twenty dollar bills and slid them across the counter to her (he’d found them in an envelope in the glove box, along with several dozen others). “Whatever that will get me.”

When Nadine reached out to take them, she paused, and Will could tell she was eyeing the bruises on his wrist, at the obvious shape of a handprint, and felt the sharp spike of her alarm.

When she looked up at his face, Will wasn't fast enough to turn away, and he saw her eyes widen at the sight of the fresh scar on his cheek, the old one on his brow. He shifted nervously under her gaze, guilty when he felt the gentle touch of her concern.

"Ya get in a fight?" She asked him, doing her best to sound casual.

"It was an accident." He mumbled, risking another glance at her. She looked solemn, her eyes sad and her lips pressed together as she nodded.

"My husband used to say the exact same thing." She said. "Every time he hit me. Never meant it, he'd say. He'd never do it again, he'd say. Funny." She continued as she opened the cash register. "He never did nothin' that left any permanent damage. He was careful like that. Only in places I could cover up, too. Took me forever to figure out he wasn't ever gonna change."

"No, this isn't-it's not-" Will sputtered. "I'm not abused."

Nadine raised an eyebrow at him. "Took me forever to realize that too." Was all she said as she handed him his receipt. "Everyone kept tellin' me he was no good. My mama begged me to leave for years before I finally did."

"...So what convinced you?" Will asked her.

"I don't know." She said with a frown. "It wasn't one specific thing. One day I just woke up and something was different." She paused again, thinking. "I won't tell you that he's bad for you, or how much better off you'll be if ya just leave." She said after a moment. "I 'spect you already know all that, and you probably have plenty of people who know you better than me tell you the same thing. I know it won't do no good 'cause even after I finally realized he was a monster, I found reasons to stay. Had excuses for everybody. See, thing is, no one's gonna say anything to you that you don't already know, even the things ya can't admit to yourself. There ain't no magic word that's gonna knock some sense into you, make it all clear. Ain't nobody gonna convince you to leave. It's something you gotta decide yourself. For yourself."

She reached out and gently cupped his hand in hers. Will looked down at her fingers, the loose way she entwined them with his, and bit his lip.

“You ever need any help, honey, you let me know. All right?” She said, giving his hand a small squeeze. Will nodded, his throat tight, as he pulled away.

“Thank you.” He whispered before he turned to leave. It wasn’t until he’d pushed the door open that Nadine called out to him again.

“You take care of yourself, now, boy.” She said. “Your mama’s real worried ‘bout ‘cha, ya know.”

“My mama?” Will echoed, puzzled. Nadine nodded.

“She says she’s been tryin’ to help you but’cha won’t listen.” Nadine said. “Says you’re afraid to.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Will said stiffly. “My mother’s been missing for over thirty years.”

Nadine looked at him with pity, and it felt odd to see that it was genuine. “Honey, she ain’t missing.”

Will had figured out a long time ago that just because they'd never found her body, it didn’t mean she was alive. Not long after he’d joined the NOPD, he’d found the report from the night she disappeared, read the responding officer’s statement, the detective’s notes that were taken over the months that followed. Will knew she was dead, knew his daddy had known it all along even if he refused to admit it, knew there wasn’t any possible way she could have lasted long on her own, bad off as she was.

He knew that, yes. But that didn’t mean he wanted to hear it from someone else.

“Ma’am, all due respect, but I don’t believe in any of that.” Will informed her gruffly, and Nadine nodded.

“Yeah, she said you didn’t.” She told him. “She also said you wouldn’t like hearin’ it - bit of a sore spot for ya.” She scrunched up her mouth so that it was drawn up like a purse string. “Low hanging fruit, she says.”

Will felt his breath catch at those words, felt them worm their way inside him and begin to wrap around him, before he abruptly shoved them off. Before they could sink their claws too deep.

“Yeah?” Will asked sarcastically, with much more bravado than he actually felt. He hated that the conversation had shifted the way it had, that whatever moment the two of them might have shared would be forever ruined because Will wasn’t strong enough to simply nod and play along. That his first reaction to any threat, real or perceived, was to lash out. Be rude. Because it had worked out so well for him in the past, hadn’t it? “She say anything else?”

Nadine shrugged. “Just that she’s sorry.” She said simply. “For what she did to you.” She frowned suddenly, cocked her head as if she was straining to hear. “Wait, no. For what she *tried* to do to you. Sorry. She wants you to know she didn’t mean it - she wasn’t thinkin’ straight.”

Will stared at her for a long moment, faint stirrings of doubt holding him in place. What she was saying was just vague enough that anyone could find meaning in it, but just detailed enough to give him pause.

‘It doesn’t mean anything.’ He told himself firmly. ‘You know it doesn’t - what has she told you? Nothing. Nothing, really, nothing for sure. For God’s sake, snap out of it! Don’t you remember what happened the last time you believed someone had all the answers for you?!’

Of course he did. How could he forget?

“Goodbye, Nadine.” He told her softly, hoping she would forgive him his jagged edges and sharp tongue. That she would understand he had been hurt one too many times by people who said they loved him that any kindness, and interest in him, made him wary. He was pretty sure she knew that, though. He hoped so. “And thanks again.”

“Bye, Will.”

Will stepped back over the line of brick dust and strode quickly back to his car.

It didn’t occur to him as he was filling his tank, or even after he had climbed back into the truck and started it.

It was only after he’d pulled away that he realized he had never told her his name.

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The sun had just set by the time Will pulled up to the house. Burning red on the horizon, deep blue overhead, with just enough light still left to see Hannibal on the front porch, reclining on a wicker chair with a glass of amber liquid in his hand.

Will sighed. He had known he’d have to face Hannibal eventually - it was kind of unavoidable if he was planning on staying under the same roof as him - but he had been hoping it would later rather than sooner. At least long enough for him to sulk and lick his wounded pride before he came crawling back.

No such luck, it seemed. As Will climbed out from the truck, he saw that Hannibal had risen to his feet and was leaning over the porch railing, watching him with an expression that was impossible to read. Will resisted the urge to shift nervously under his gaze. Instead, he squared his shoulders and raised his head high, glaring back across the distance.

“Don’t tell me you’ve been sitting there waiting for me all day.” He called. Hannibal shrugged.

“Actually, I spent most of my day baby-proofing the house.” He answered.

Will cocked an eyebrow at him as he closed the distance between them. “Something you wanna tell me?”

Hannibal smiled, however slightly. “I was merely preparing for your return.” He said serenely, swirling his drink. “I doubted you would be so willing to submit yourself to my suggestions tonight, after how upset you were this morning.”

“Joke’s on you, then.” Will scowled. “I lied - I was never sleepwalking. So you wasted your whole day for nothing.”

“Oh dear.” Hannibal said, eyes fairly dancing with amusement. “It would seem you’ve played me for a fool.”

“Yeah, well. Wouldn’t be the first time.”

“It most certainly would not.” Hannibal agreed, beaming. “As I’ve said, I can never entirely predict you.”

“I seriously doubt that. You could predict me well enough to know I’d be back.” Will pointed out.

Hannibal shrugged. “If you love something you set it free.” He said. “And hope that it comes back to you.”

Will narrowed his eyes. “That’s not the saying.”

“No?”

“It’s ‘If you love something, set it free. If it comes back to you, it’s yours’.”

“Is it?” Hannibal asked him idly. “My mistake, Will.”

“You don’t make mistakes.” Will said flatly.

“I’m only human, Will. Contrary to whatever else I you might think of me.”

“Hmm. You wanna know what else I think?”

“Always.”

“I think you knew the whole time I wasn’t sleepwalking. I think you were just screwing with me like you always do.”

“That is a very interesting theory, William.” Was all Hannibal said as he raised his glass to his lips. Will waited until he’d lowered it before he spoke again.

“Did you mean it when you said you loved me?” He asked. “Or were you just screwing with me then, too?”

Hannibal considered him for a moment. “Would you believe me even if I told the truth?”

“Probably not.”

“Then does it really matter?”

“No.” Will said quietly. “No, I guess not.”

Hannibal offered his drink to Will, and he accepted it. It burned going down. The two of them stood silently together for a long time, passing the glass back and forth and watching the last of the golden light as it finally disappeared.

“For what it’s worth, Will.” Hannibal said suddenly. “I meant it.”

Will looked over at him. Between the dim glow of the stars and the effects of the liquor, Hannibal’s features seemed ill-defined and muted, his edges smeared.

“I know.” Will said. He did too - he had known it for a long time. Since the day they met and he’d first felt Hannibal’s psyche brush lightly against his own. Barely there, just enough to notice, he had felt it. He just hadn’t realized what it was. Looking back now, after everything that had happened, it was easy to understand why Hannibal had done what he had done, to reconstruct his thinking, however twisted it was. It had all been for Will.

“You can’t know if you still have doubts.” Hannibal told him. Will shook his head.

“I know you love me.” He said. “You’ve always loved me. You never stopped - even when you were trying to kill me, you loved me.” He took another swallow. “There’s a fine line between love and hate.” He murmured. “I’ve walked that line for years when it comes to you. But I’m not sure it exists for you at all. Hurting me and loving me are one in the same for you.”

Hannibal hummed thoughtfully as he took the glass back from Will. “It is for most people. The only difference is mine was intentional.”

“Well, at least you admit it.” Will said bitterly, fingers tracing the ruby red bracelet of bruises around his wrist.

Hannibal turned toward him again, reaching out to gently cup his cheek. “Could you ever learn to trust me?” He whispered, his thumb stroking lightly back and forth over Will’s scar.

Will thought about it. “I don’t know.” He eventually admitted.

“Would you at least be willing to try?” Hannibal asked him.

The entire world seemed to be holding its breath, waiting for Will’s answer.

“...Yes.” Will breathed at last.

Hannibal’s hold tightened, however slightly, however briefly, and by the faint light of the faraway stars, Will saw him smile. “Thank you, Will.” Was all he said, just as quietly, before touching his forehead to Will’s. Will watched him warily, and it was only when Hannibal pulled away and opened his eyes that he stepped away.

“I’ve forgiven you once before.” Will reminded him. “I won’t do it again.”

Hannibal’s face betrayed nothing when Will leaned closer.

“If I ever find out you’ve lied to me again.” He murmured in Hannibal’s ear. “I’ll kill you.”

Hannibal smiled at his promise, then turned his head ever so slightly, and kissed Will’s cheek.

“Then I suppose I better make sure you never find out.” He whispered back.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading, hope you liked it!

You Try Hiding Another You

Chapter Summary

Will and Hannibal go on a road trip

Chapter Notes

Please note before you read:

The next three chapters are going to be dealing with some subject matter that some people might find upsetting. I don't want to give anything away, but let's just say that there will be situations in which consent might be considered dubious. I don't think it's too bad/graphic, but I would rather err on the side of caution with this one.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Dammit!” Will swore, yanking at the cabinet door. No matter how hard he pulled, no matter what he did, he couldn’t get it open. Will gave it another half-hearted tug and when it still refused to budge, he shot a glare over his shoulder at Hannibal.

“Okay, you’ve made your point!” He snapped. “Now will you take these stupid things off?”

“William, we’ve been over this.” Hannibal reminded him, sounding far too smug for Will’s liking. “It’s really quite simple - you just have to hold the button down on each side to open it.”

“Or, you can just take them off and save us an extra step!”

“I went to so much trouble installing those child locks for you, Will.” Hannibal sighed dramatically. “You could at least try and pretend to be appreciative.”

“God, I thought you were kidding.” Will groaned. He pressed the button on one side, and then the other. “It’s still not working!”

“You have to push them both down at the same time-”

“How about I just kick it in?” Will snarled, finally giving up. “Or you know what? I think I saw a sledge hammer in the garage, maybe I can use that.”

It was obvious Hannibal was trying not to laugh as he rose from the table. “Alright, Will, that’s enough.” He crossed the room in three long strides before dropping gracefully down to the floor beside Will to inspect the device. Almost as soon as his fingers touched it, the lock sprang open. Will glared at it hatefully.

“See?” Hannibal said with a wickedly patronizing smile. “No need to get so upset.”

“I’m taking them off.” Will informed him waspishly as he pushed himself to his feet.

“By all means.” Hannibal said with a gracious wave of his hand. “I won’t stop you.” He waited until Will had stalked out of the kitchen and into the hallway before calling out, “The child locks might, though. You can’t take them off unless they’re unlocked.”

With a few muttered curses, Will went quickly to the closet at the foot of stairs, where he’d seen a toolbox the other day when he was exploring the house. Half-expecting to find the closet door secured with another one of the ridiculous child safety locks that Hannibal had installed throughout the house, Will grabbed the handle as hard as he could and wrenched it open. To his surprise, the door immediately swung out and collided against the wall with a loud bang, and Will felt a small stab of satisfaction at the sound of drywall cracking. From behind him, where she was lounging in the sitting room, Chiyoh heaved a loud, long-suffering sigh. Will ignored her. Instead, he began shoving the hanging coats and various cardboard boxes aside.

He found the toolbox pressed against the back wall, tucked behind a pair of rain boots - exactly where he'd left it. But as he was reaching down to pull it out, Will noticed something he couldn't remember seeing before - an old Gladstone bag wedged into the far corner.

Will eyed the bag suspiciously for a moment, then glanced back down the empty hallway before he picked it up. It was heavier than he was expecting, and he could hear the gentle tinkling of glass against glass and a strange kind of rattling noise coming from inside. Will quickly set it down and ripped it open, his heart pounding as he looked inside.

A suture kit. Rubbing alcohol and iodine. Bandages, gauze, medical tape, scissors. A penlight, a blood pressure cuff, a stethoscope, a thermometer, a pulse oximeter, a blood sugar reader. A small bottle of aspirin, Tylenol, several different kinds of antibiotics. Scopolamine patches. Butterfly needles, saline bags. Packages of sterilized syringes. A vial of morphine. Clonazepam….Haldol...Midazolam…

Will stared down at the bottles in his shaking hands, his breath catching in his throat. He could easily understand why Hannibal would want a first aid kit, why he would want to stockpile certain medications. Hell, he could even appreciate having the sedative…but the anticonvulsants, the antipsychotics…those were obviously meant for Will, and the sight of them left him reeling. Why did Hannibal have them? He hadn't had a seizure in years, he wasn't crazy…or was he? Did Hannibal know something he didn't? Was he preparing for something Will hadn't realized?

He was so upset, so shaken, that when a hand suddenly touched his shoulder, Will jumped, dropping the plastic prescription bottle of clonazepam he'd been holding.

"Will?" Hannibal asked him "Is something wrong?"

Will swallowed thickly before he slowly turned around to face him. "What the hell is this?" He croaked, gesturing at the open bag, its scattered contents. Hannibal glanced briefly over at the mess and then looked back at Will, studying him, as though he were trying to gauge how best to answer him.

"Just a few supplies I've put together." He eventually said. "As you've pointed out before, we won't be able to seek medical attention should we need it, and I thought it would be wise to be as best prepared as we possibly can be."

“That’s not what I meant and you know it.”

“I’m afraid I don’t-”

“The schizophrenia pills, Hannibal!” Will snapped, snatching up the bottle he’d dropped and throwing it at him. “The seizure medicine! Why do you have them?!”

“Will, please calm down-”

“No! Don’t lie to me!” Will backed quickly away from him, scrambling against the door.

“I’m not lying to you.” Hannibal promised, reaching out to steady him. “I have them because I thought you might need them, Will.”

“ *Why* would you think I needed them?!”

“Because,” Hannibal explained. “I bought this house after you were released from the hospital.”

Will stilled, considering these words. “What do you mean?”

Hannibal gently brushed aside a lock of hair that had fallen over Will’s eyes. “It was after your trial.” He elaborated. “A few weeks after you were released from Chilton’s care.” His mouth twisted bitterly around those words. “You were so angry with me back then. Do you remember?”

“Vividly.” Will assured him flatly.

Hannibal's lips quirked briefly before he continued. "I knew you would be. Just like I knew that it would take you some time to understand why I did what I did. But I hadn't expected just how long it would take you, how angry you were - how hurt you were." He paused for a moment, his expression pinched and distant. "I thought…I thought I had lost you. I thought I had ruined the best thing that had ever happened to me. That's why when you came back, I…"

When he trailed off, Will didn't push him to continue. Because he had never seen Hannibal like this before - stumbling, struggling, stuttering and stopping. To be at such a loss for words, to not know what to say, when for as long as Will had known him, he had always had an answer for anything. Had always known exactly what to say in any situation, effortlessly weaving silk from his silver tongue.

Hannibal sighed. "I bought this house not long after." He continued. "You were willing to give me another chance, and I was determined not to waste it. I wanted to show you I could make you happy. That I could provide you with anything you could ever want and everything you could ever need. That I could care for you better than I could hurt you." He nodded at the bag. "We've talked about this before, Will." He reminded him. "There's always a chance the encephalitis will recur. If it does, I won't make the same mistake twice."

A beat of silence passed between them before Will found his voice again. "How do I know you're not lying?" He whispered. "You've done this before, you…you've drugged me. Toyed with me. Without me realizing it. You made me think that I was losing my mind." He heaved a shuddering breath. "How do I know?" He asked him. "How do I know you're not going to do it again?"

"Do you really think if I was planning to do something like that again I would leave the evidence out in the open? Where you could easily find it?" Hannibal teased him with a small smile.

"I don't know." Will said miserably. "I never know with you."

Hannibal sighed again, then picked up one of the discarded prescription bottles. "Look at the date, Will." He urged, holding it out for Will to see. "I wrote these for you just a few days after you were released from the hospital. You would have been taking these to combat the damage from the encephalitis at the time. As for the rest…I was just trying to be prepared."

While Will studied the little bottle, turning it over in his hands, Hannibal gathered up the remaining supplies that were strewn across the floor and began to pack them back inside the bag.

“The antibiotics have all expired.” He observed regretfully, setting these aside. Will glanced over at him.

“Are you getting rid of them?” He asked, and Hannibal shrugged.

“There’s no point in keeping them.” He said. “They’re useless now.”

“...Get rid of all of it.” Will told him, and Hannibal’s expression hardened.

“No.” He said firmly.

“Please, Hannibal-”

“No.” Hannibal repeated, shaking his head. “I understand that you’re scared, Will. I understand that you have every right to not trust me or my intentions, but this is medicine you might need someday. It’s medicine that we can’t get right now and medicine I don’t know if we will be able to get in the future. I’m sorry. But it’s for your own good.”

So saying, Hannibal reached over and grabbed the Gladstone bag before Will could and then rose quickly to his feet. Will looked up at him, and something about his expression made Hannibal’s soften, however slightly.

“No need to look so tragic, Will.” He said. “I’m just trying to help you.”

“I know.” Will told him, hugging his knees to his chest and curling protectively around himself. “That’s the problem.”

The look on Hannibal’s face was impossible to read when he finally turned away - whether it was pity, hurt, frustration, or something else, Will wasn’t sure. What he did know, watching silently as Hannibal disappeared down the hall and into his room, was that he would probably never find that bag again, not if Hannibal didn’t want him to, anyway - and there was something that felt final about the way he shut the door behind him.

Will was so angry at Hannibal that he barely spoke to him for the rest of the day, and when he did, the exchange was always tense, over almost as soon as it began, and never initiated by Will. And Hannibal, much to Will’s surprise, didn’t try and push him to say more. Instead, he allowed Will to keep his distance, speaking to him only when necessary and bearing Will’s irritability with grace.

Will’s silence and Hannibal’s suffering of it continued for a few more days and seemed to have no end in sight, until one afternoon when Hannibal asked Will a question that caught him so off guard, he actually forgot that he was mad.

“Would you want to go to Atlanta with me?”

Will looked up from the book he was reading. “Huh?”

“I need to go to Atlanta tomorrow.” Hannibal explained. “I thought perhaps you would like to come with me.”

Will eyed him suspiciously. “What’s in Atlanta?” He eventually asked.

“Not much, I’m afraid.” Hannibal said mournfully.

“No.” Will said impatiently. “I mean why do you have to go there?”

“The FBI seized the passport I used the last time I fled the country.” Hannibal reminded him. “I need a new one.”

“And fake passports come from Atlanta?”

Hannibal smirked. “There is a company based in Moscow with offices all across America.” He told Will. “Atlanta just happens to be the one closest to us.”

Will narrowed his eyes at him. “So, what, you’re gonna drive all the way out there just to pick up a fake ID and then come right back?”

“Hardly.” Hannibal scoffed. “If I’m going to drive six and a half hours for anything, I intend to make it worth my while.”

Will felt his stomach sink. “Hannibal...”

Hannibal cocked his head, as though he didn’t understand Will’s distress. “What is it, Will?”

“You can’t.”

“Can’t I?” Hannibal asked, raising an eyebrow. “Why not?”

“Don’t play dumb. You know perfectly well why not!” Will snapped. Hannibal regarded him coldly.

“Need I remind you,” He said. “That I spent years hiding in plain sight from the FBI while I was in Baltimore?”

“That’s because they weren’t looking for you.”

Hannibal actually had the gall to look offended. “Everyone was looking for me!”

“No, everyone was looking for the Chesapeake Ripper.” Will pointed out through clenched teeth. “Who nobody had any reason to suspect was you.”

Hannibal fairly preened at those words. “You’re right, they didn’t.” He agreed smugly. “And even after everyone knew exactly who I was, when the whole world knew my face and name, how long did I manage to avoid suspicion in Italy?”

“Not nearly long enough to impress me.”

“The point is,” Hannibal said testily, shooting Will a glare. “I know how to evade the police. The only reason I was captured at all was because of you.”

“This is different. Jack-”

“I have no intention of spending the rest of my life hiding from Jack Crawford, Will.” Hannibal spat.

“Well, lucky for you, you won’t have to worry about that if you’re behind bars.” Will said sarcastically. “Since he’ll know exactly where you are at all times.”

“He has to catch me first.”

“Which I’m sure he will - considering it doesn’t sound like you’re gonna make it all that difficult for him.”

“If you’re so convinced I can’t be trusted on my own,” Hannibal suggested nastily, “Why don’t you just come with me?”

Will hesitated.

While he had no doubt that Hannibal was really planning on going to Atlanta like he said, and for the reason he claimed, Will didn’t know if there was something that Hannibal wasn’t telling him, if there was more to this sudden trip than just collecting a series of fake documents.

It probably didn’t matter. Hannibal would go to Atlanta with or without him and there was almost nothing Will could do to stop him.

Not that he should stop him - the only reason they hadn’t left already was because Hannibal needed those papers to cross the border, and without them, they were stuck. So even if there was more going on than Hannibal was letting on, and if he was going anyway, wouldn’t it be better if Will *was* with him? To keep an eye on him? Will knew Hannibal well enough to know that he could help himself from acting as he saw fit, but if Will was there, then maybe he could stop him from doing anything too reckless or crazy. Something that was sure to get them caught. Something too...Hannibal.

Will chewed his lip. “How long would we be there?” He eventually asked.

“Just one night.” Hannibal assured him.

“And that’s all you’re doing?” Will pressed. “You’re just going to pick up your papers?”

“There’s also a highly recommended French restaurant I’m quite eager to try.”

“Of course there is.” Will muttered irritably. “Anything else?”

Hannibal shrugged. “The hotel has a bar it’s well known for.”

Will heaved a long and drawn-out sigh, rolling his eyes toward the ceiling. “Is Chiyoh coming?”

“No.”

“Fine.”

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Open water.

Nothing but miles and miles of raging sea in every direction. Waves easily cresting twenty feet high. His boat bobbing and rocking beside him.

Black sky overhead, rain coming down in buckets.

Will struggled to keep his head above the water. He could barely see, could barely breathe. Waves washing over him, threatening to take him under. Just outside his reach, just beyond fingertips, a rope dangling from over the side of his boat. If he could grab it, if he could just manage to get a hold of it, he could pull himself back up, haul himself to the safety of his boat.

He stretched his hand as far as it could go. Felt the rough and frayed fibers of the rope drag against his raw and puckered flesh...

A wave swept over him. Dragged him down. Will struggled to the surface, choking on burning seawater, and gasped for air. The boat had drifted closer-

Another wave swelled. Threw him against the side of the boat. Will bit his tongue, saw stars, spat blood. His fingers scrabbled frantically against the slippery sides of the boat. His nails split. Trails of scarlet blood along the sides.

“Let me help you, Will.”

A voice above him. Barely discernible through the roar of the storm. Will looked up, squinted through the darkness and the rivulets of water running down his eyes. A shadowy figure standing over him on the boat.

“Dear heart. Let me help you.” It called again. Will shook his head.

“No!”

A mouthful of water. A flash of lightning.

The figure crouching closer.

“I can help you, Will.” It said. “All you have to do is take my hand.”

The wind was picking up. The waves continued to crash and pound relentlessly against him. Will was getting tired. His body was battered, bruised.The muscles in his legs and arms were seizing, his lungs screaming.

He didn’t have a choice.

He panted. Nodded. Reached out his hand once more. Felt the ice cold grip of his savior encircle his wrist. Impossible to escape.

It pulled him closer, refusing to let him go.

“You’re only drowning because you’re fighting so hard.” It told him. “All you have to do is let go.”

And before Will even realized what was happening, the figure had grabbed his head. Forced it down beneath the surface of the waves. Held him firm as Will began to thrash-

Will woke with a gasp, drenched in sweat. It wasn’t until a couple hours later that he finally fell asleep again.

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Will didn’t even stir when his alarm went off the next morning, and it was nearly an hour later before Hannibal finally decided to see what was taking him so long.

“Will? Will, wake up.”

Will groaned into his pillow. “Time is it?” He mumbled.

“After eight.” Hannibal told him. He seemed worried, in a vague sort of way. “Did you forget we were leaving today?”

Will shook his head. “Must have slept through my alarm.” He said, rubbing his eyes.

Hannibal frowned at that and pressed a hand to Will’s forehead. “Are you feeling alright?”

“I’m fine!” Will snapped, batting his hands away and forcing himself to sit up. He could remember the last time Hannibal had checked him for a fever, and it was a memory that Will would rather forget. “I’m just tired.”

“Hmm.” Hannibal hummed, looking displeased and sounding skeptical. “Very well. Get dressed, Will. I would like to reach Atlanta before rush hour. And I want you to eat something before we go.”

Grumbling under his breath, Will dragged himself out of bed and stumbled over to his wardrobe. Hannibal lingered for a few more minutes, watching him, and when he was apparently satisfied that Will didn’t need to be supervised, he disappeared back downstairs to finish packing the car.

When they finally pulled away from the house, much later than they had originally planned, Hannibal glanced over at Will, who sat swaying slightly in his seat and blinking heavily.

“Did you have trouble sleeping last night, Will?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?” Hannibal asked lightly. “You seem very tired this morning.”

“Is that your polite way of telling me I look like shit?”

Hannibal chuckled. “Not at all.” He assured Will. “Although lack of sleep would certainly explain your cranky mood.”

“No, that’s just my natural state.” Will grumbled, “You of all people should know that.”

Hannibal smiled slightly, almost fondly. “Yes, I suppose you have always been incredibly rude, haven’t you? Especially to me.”

“Yeah, well. You deserve it.”

Hannibal kept his gaze fixed firmly away from Will. “I’m not sure I agree.”

“I’ll bet you don’t.” Will sneered. “Framing me for murder was your idea of doing me a favor, after all. And I can only imagine what trying to eat me was supposed to be.”

“Oh, come now, Will.” Hannibal drawled. “Surely you of all people can imagine exactly what that was supposed to be.”

“I can’t-”

“In fact, I think you know exactly where it was. Even if you don’t want to admit it.”

“No-”

“Yes.” Hannibal breathed. “You do. So tell me, Will - what was it supposed to be?”

“...Humiliation.” Will mumbled, avoiding his eyes. “Cannibalism is the ultimate way of dominating someone, conquering them. That’s what that was supposed to be-”

“No!” Hannibal snapped, his tone ice cold. “Perhaps for other people, but not for me.”

“Then what-”

“That, my dear, I would liken more to a declaration of undying love - a last ditch effort to keep you with me forever.”

Will felt his face flush at those words.

“I told you not to say things like that.” He sputtered, pleading.

“I know you did.” Hannibal confirmed airily. “But as you’ve so kindly pointed out, I’ve never felt the need to respect your boundaries before. So why should I start now?”

“Why do you even bother?” Will hissed at him. “It’s not like I encourage you - I’ve never once told you I felt the same way.”

“...No.” Hannibal agreed quietly. “You most certainly have not. Tell me, Will - what would you say if I told you that of all the things you’ve said to me over the years, it’s the one thing you haven’t said that has hurt me the most?”

Will opened his mouth to answer, but closed it just as soon as he did, the words dying on his lips. Because he didn’t know what to say to that, didn’t know how it made him feel. So in the end, he said nothing, and tried to ignore the faint stirrings of guilt, the burning desire to hurt for no better reason than the fact that he could.

The two of them were quiet for a long time after that, each staring steadfastly straight ahead at the road stretched out in front of them and refusing to look at the other. It wasn’t until they were well into Mississippi that Will finally broke the heavy silence that had settled over them.

“There’s something I never understood.” He admitted, his voice no more than a whisper. “Why weren’t you offended? When we first met?”

“Who says I wasn’t?”

Will rolled his eyes. “Why weren’t you *more* offended?” He amended. “I was extremely rude to you.”

“You were. But I was rude to you as well.” Hannibal reminded him. “I lied to you. I told you I was there to help profile Garrett Jacob Hobbs when I was really analyzing you. I ambushed you. Of course you were defensive - you had every right to be. How could I resent you for that?”

“You’ve done far worse to people for far less.” Will pointed out.

“There are exceptions to every rule.” Hannibal said lightly, and when he looked over and saw the look on Will’s face, he sighed. “I’m afraid I don’t have a good answer for you, Will, because I myself don’t know why. All I can tell you is that it was different with you. I wasn’t offended by you, I was...intrigued. There was something about you that I found irresistibly charming.”

Will snorted. “There’s not a single person on the face of the earth who would ever describe me as ‘charming’.”

“I would.”

“Well then, clearly, you’re insane.”

“There is always some madness in love.” Hannibal quoted with a smile. “I knew from the moment I met you that there would never be anyone like you again, Will. I was powerless against you. I always have been. I couldn’t destroy you even if I wanted to. And besides,” He continued cheerfully. “We had only just met. It would have been extremely suspicious if the

Chesapeake Ripper were to suddenly claim you as his next victim. Even Jack would have realized the connection."

Will let out a bark of laughter at that, and Hannibal grinned widely as it gradually died down to quiet chuckling.

"It's good to know I can still make you laugh, Will." He said.

"I think you're the only one who actually can." Will told him around a yawn. A moment later, when he was reaching for the thermos of coffee he'd brought, Hannibal stopped him.

"Why don't you go back to sleep?" He suggested, taking Will's hand in his. "We have a long day ahead of us."

Will shook his head, his heavy eyes locked on their entwined fingers. "I'm not tired."

"All right."

They made it all the way to Georgia before Will finally fell asleep.

"Will…Will…Wake up, Will…"

"Mmph." Will opened his eyes, and was surprised to find Hannibal leaning over him. "Ha'bal? Whazzit?"

Hannibal smiled widely at him. “Come on, darling.” Hannibal purred, cupping Will’s cheek in his hand. “We’re here.”

“Why are you talking like that?” Will mumbled grumpily, dragging a hand over his eyes.

“Because,” Hannibal said pointedly. “The nice valet is here to park the car for us.”

If Will wasn’t awake before, he was then.

“What? Valet?” Will echoed, sitting bolt upright and looking wildly around. Through his window, Will could see a meticulously kept garden and an enormous fountain, and behind Hannibal, a man in uniform waiting patiently in front of a series of stone columns. Will’s mouth dropped open at the sight.

“Hannibal!” He whispered. “Where are we?!”

“The hotel, dear.” Hannibal said, taking Will’s hand and gently pulling him to his feet.

“No, I mean-”

It was only once he was standing that Will caught sight of the black flag hanging overhead.

“The St. Regis!” He wailed, staring up at it in horror. “Are you fucking kidding me?!”

“Only the best for you, my sweet boy.” Hannibal crooned sarcastically into his ear. He kept his arm wrapped tightly around Will’s waist as he guided him to the door.

“What is the matter with you?” Will hissed as they stepped inside. “Are you *trying* to get us caught?”

“Will, do you really think anyone expects the two most wanted men in the country to just walk into the most expensive hotel in a city hundreds of miles away from where they were last seen?”

“ARE YOU FU-”

“Shh.” Hannibal hushed him, drawing him closer. “None of that now, Will. We wouldn’t want to draw attention to ourselves, now would we?”

Fuming, Will stood silently beside Hannibal as he checked them in, ducking his head and fidgeting restlessly every time someone came a little too close or moved a little too suddenly.

“There we are!” The woman behind the counter said brightly as she handed Hannibal their room key. “Enjoy your stay with us, gentlemen!”

“I’m sure we will, thank you.” Hannibal assured her coolly. He glanced over at Will with a smile so cloying that it made Will’s stomach turn. “Ready, my love?”

“What’s with all the pet names?” Will muttered as he was led away.

“The staff may or may not be under the impression that we are a couple.” Hannibal whispered back.

“Laying it on kinda thick, aren’t you?” Will growled.

“Well, given your usual…demeanor, shall we say, I thought it would be best to overcompensate.”

“What happened to not drawing attention to ourselves?”

“People are often uncomfortable with public displays of affection.” Hannibal reminded him as they stepped into the elevator. “They prefer to look away when they see it - unfortunately, this is especially true when the couple is homosexual.” Will felt himself blush at these words, and Hannibal smirked before he continued. “So you see, *dear* , the more I dote on you, the more likely it is that people will go out of their way to avoid us.”

“I think you’re just looking for an excuse to screw with me.” Will grumbled. “Besides, the south isn’t known for being particularly tolerant when it comes to sexuality - gay or straight. If anything, all you’re doing is making sure we stand out *more* .”

“Yes, but don’t forget, Will, that Georgia is a swing state.” Hannibal pointed out as the elevator doors sprang open. “I think they might be a little more progressive here than you realize.”

“Yeah, you’re right. What do I know? I only grew up here.”

Hannibal chuckled as he ushered Will down the hall to their room. “Is this your polite way of telling me that you want me to stop?”

“I wasn’t trying to be polite.”

“I’d be worried if you were.” Hannibal said as he pressed their key card to the sensor on the door. “After you, Will.”

Will glared at him. “You didn’t tell them we were on our honeymoon or something, did you?” He asked. “Are there gonna be rose petals everywhere?”

“Please, William, who would actually believe anyone would come here for their honeymoon?” Hannibal scoffed.

“Jesus, why do you hate Atlanta so much-” Will trailed off as he finally stepped inside, staring in disbelief at the paneled walls, the black and white tiled floors, the hallway stretched before him. “A suite.” He said weakly. “You actually booked a fucking suite.”

“Of course, Will.” Hannibal said, closing the door behind them. “What did you expect?”

“Unbelievable.” Will growled, stomping away from him. “Where are our bags?”

“I tipped the valet extra to have them brought up to our room.” Hannibal called after him. “They should be here momentarily.”

Will found that the rest of the suite was just as ridiculously and insufferably lavish as the foyer - rich colors, expensive furniture, even a small crystal chandelier hanging in the sitting room. But the worst offense was in the bedroom.

“Hannibal!”

He appeared a moment later. “Yes, Will?”

“There’s only one bed.” Will informed him through his teeth.

“Ah, so there is. How perceptive you are.” Hannibal said serenely.

“I’m not sleeping with you.”

“I don’t expect you to.” Hannibal reassured him. “I booked the room before you agreed to come with me.”

“And they didn’t have *anything* else available once you knew I was?” Will asked him, doubt fairly dripping off his tongue.

“Perhaps they did.” Hannibal said with a shrug. “I didn’t ask.”

“What do you mean you didn’t ask?” Will sputtered.

“Will, a couple would share a bed.”

“But why do we have to pretend to be a couple at all?!”

“Because that’s not the nature of our relationship as Jack knows it.” Hannibal replied. “Even if someone recognizes us and reports us, the FBI will disregard it as soon as they start questioning the staff.” When Will didn’t answer him, Hannibal put his hand over Will’s shoulder. “There’s a sleeper sofa in the sitting room.” He said. “I will be more than happy to sleep there if that’s what you prefer.”

Will pushed Hannibal’s hand away. “Stop it.” He snapped. “I know what you’re trying to do.”

“And what am I trying to do, Will?” Hannibal asked patiently.

“What you always do - you’re manipulating me.”

“No-”

“You are. You’re trying to make me think you’re saving me from a situation that *you* created in the first place!”

“Will-”

“You’re grooming me.” Will said, balling his shaking hands into fists. “That’s what this is about, what you’ve been doing this entire time - it’s conditioning. You’re trying to get me to see you as someone safe, make me think of you as someone I can trust, so that when you finally do force yourself on me, I’ll surrender to you without a fight-”

Hannibal’s eyes flashed at that, and then he seized Will’s arms without warning, pushing him against the wall. Will gasped at the sudden movement and writhed helplessly in Hannibal’s unbreakable hold.

“Let go of me!” Will cried, pounding his chest weakly with his fists. The angle was awkward - he couldn’t put nearly enough force behind the blows as he wanted. “Get off!”

“How dare you say that!” Hannibal hissed back, ignoring Will’s pathetic attempts to break free. “How dare you even think it! I would never force myself on you and you know it!”

“Yes, you would!” Will snapped as he twisted in Hannibal’s arms. “You already have! Or was it different when you were just fucking with my head?”

“That’s enough, Will.” Hannibal said coldly, and when Will continued to fight him, his grip tightened painfully and he shook him slightly. “Enough!”

He didn’t shout, but there was something in his tone that made Will instantly go still, something in his expression that made him realize he had crossed a line he hadn’t even known existed. Will shrank away from him as much as he could, but trapped as he was between Hannibal and the wall, he didn’t have very far to go. Above him, Hannibal heaved a long, shuddering breath, as though he were trying to force himself to calm down.

“You shouldn’t say such things.” He warned Will quietly. “You have no idea what just the thought of someone hurting you that way does to me. If anyone ever did, I guarantee that not even you could imagine what I would do to them…”

Will was terrified. Not so much by what Hannibal was saying, but by the look on his face - it was nothing like anything he had ever seen before, and something he hoped to never see again. He whimpered at the sight, and the sound seemed to catch Hannibal by surprise. He blinked, long and slow, as if waking from a dream, his distant, unfocused gaze suddenly sharpening and his dark eyes flickering immediately to Will's face. Hannibal studied him with a frown, as if he had only just realized how scared Will was, and why. After a long moment, he released Will's arms from his grasp so that he could gently cup his face in his hands.

"Oh, Will." He murmured regretfully. "Don't you know what you mean to me by now? What I would do for you?" But Will couldn't answer him. He could only stand there, wide-eyed and trembling, as Hannibal began to caress his cheek. "You poor boy." Hannibal said, his voice low, hypnotic. "You're so confused, Will. If only you would let me help you. If only you would let me show you just how much you mean to me..."

He sighed again, and then very gently tipped Will's chin up toward his. "Please let me." He said, so softly that Will almost couldn't hear him. "Let me show you what you mean to me, Will."

Will went completely still at those words, watching silently as Hannibal began to lean closer and closer to him...

'He's going to kiss me.' He realized dazedly. "Oh, God, he's really going to kiss me…"

Their lips were just about to touch when there was a sudden and loud knock at the door. Hannibal slowly pulled away, his burning eyes still locked on Will's.

"That will be our bags." Was all he said before turning abruptly away and disappearing from the room.

It was only once he was alone that Will finally released the breath he was holding, and sank unsteadily to the bed, his heart pounding, his hand hovering over his mouth.

Hannibal had wanted to kiss him - he had actually *tried* to kiss him. Will knew he shouldn't be surprised- he knew how Hannibal felt. And he had kissed him before. But it had only been a quick, darting peck on his cheek, a dry press to his knuckles. Never had he tried to kiss him on the lips. And never while looking at Will like that.

Will trembled at the memory of it. Because for Hannibal, the line between violence and love was gossamer thin. Maybe there was no line at all. And if he had kissed Will, who knew where it would have led. Bloodshed was just as likely as passion.

So Will was glad that they had been interrupted. He was glad nothing had happened, relieved, because he didn't know where it would lead and he didn't want to find out. He didn't want something like that to happen. Not now, not ever. Because Hannibal was a monster. And because Will didn't want him and he didn't love him. Hell, most days he didn't even *like* him...

...So why did he feel so disappointed?

Will was surprised when Hannibal returned with not only their suitcases, but two garment bags as well. He opened one, checked it, and then held it out to Will. Through the open zipper, Will could see a handsome navy suit, and the sight of it instantly put him on edge.

"Put this on, please."

"Why?" Will asked, shying away from him.

"I assume you're going to insist on coming with me to meet Yuri?" Hannibal said.

"Obviously." Will said with a scowl. "But that still doesn't explain why I have to wear this."

“Because first impressions matter, Will.” Hannibal said primly. When Will still refused to take the bag, he huffed. “Because I’ve made reservations at Le Baptiste this evening.” He explained. “And it would give me great pleasure if you would join me.”

“Sounds formal.” Will said unhappily. “I assume there’s a dress code?”

“There is.”

Will weighed his options. He really didn’t want to go. Just the thought of it - of spending an evening in what was undoubtedly the most expensive restaurant in the state, eating overpriced, unpronounceable food and being surrounded by pretentious snobs who could probably take one look at him and see that he was poor, working class trash - was enough to make his skin crawl. Not to mention that by going they were also undertaking an enormous risk of someone recognizing them. No, Will didn’t want to go, and he knew Hannibal wouldn’t force him if he decided not to. He’d made it very clear that Will was free to make his own choices...but that didn’t mean he wasn’t going to somehow punish Will if he refused. In fact, it seemed very likely.

Will chewed his lip. If he went, it would make Hannibal happy, which wasn’t necessarily something Will wanted or even cared about (in fact, in Will’s experience, the happier Hannibal was the more miserable he was), but he did care about making his own life easier, and going made that more likely than the alternative. And if he went, he could at least try and minimize the risk of them being discovered. He could try and keep Hannibal in line - stop him from stabbing the waiter when he accidentally spilled his drink, or from eviscerating the loud couple at the table beside them…

Will sighed. He had a choice, but it wasn’t much of one. When he took the bag without a word, Hannibal smiled.

“Um, Hannibal?” Will asked hesitantly as he climbed out of the car. “Are you sure this is the right place?”

“I’m sure.” Hannibal said. “Why?”

There were bars over the windows. Half the letters on the neon side above the door were out (‘Liq-r’). Trash was strewn all over the sidewalk. Most of the other storefronts had been boarded up, and the apartments across the street crumbling, fire-damaged, and obviously abandoned.

“It’s just…not what I expected.”

“Looks can be deceiving.” Hannibal reminded him. “I’m sure you know that better than anyone, mylimasis.”

Will frowned. “Mylimasis?” He repeated slowly, his tongue twisting clumsily over the foreign word. “What does that mean?”

Hannibal smiled cryptically as he held the shop door open for Will. “Perhaps one day I’ll tell you.” He murmured quietly to him as they stepped inside the little corner store.

They were immediately met with the overwhelming stench of pickled herring, onions, and stale cigarettes. Will gagged and Hannibal squeezed his arm, though whether it was to reassure him or warn him to be quiet, Will didn’t know. Eyes stinging, he followed Hannibal through the tiny shop to the checkout counter in the back, where an enormous bear of a man was sitting behind the register, his eyes glued to an ancient CRT television. He ignored Hannibal and Will when they approached, and it was only when Hannibal cleared his throat that the man’s eyes flickered contemptuously toward them.

“Shto?”

Though he had no idea what it meant, there was something about the man's dismissive tone that made Will glance nervously at Hannibal, who seemed unfazed.

"Hello. I'm looking for Yuri." Hannibal said, sounding far too calm, too overly polite, for Will's liking. "I have an appointment with him."

"No Yuri here." The man said, folding his tattooed arms over his massive chest and once more turning his attention to the tv. "Buy something or leave."

"Forgive me," Hannibal frowned, "But I believe there's been a mistake. I was told-"

"No! No mistake! No Yuri here!" The man snapped, unfolding himself from his chair with a scowl and rising to his feet. He leaned threateningly over the counter, easily two inches taller than Hannibal and at least fifty pounds heavier than him. "You pay or you leave!" He snarled.

Will took a small step back from him, but Hannibal remained where he was, unmoved by the man's outburst. Instead, he raised a single, unimpressed eyebrow, and then very slowly reached inside his jacket to retrieve his wallet. Will watched silently as he casually flipped it open, his unease growing by the second.

Hannibal then said something in Russian and pulled out a handful of hundred dollar bills. He set them on the countertop and very deliberately slid them toward the man.

"Po rukam?" He said quietly, and though Will shuddered at the look on his face, knowing what it promised, the Russian was too preoccupied with counting the money to notice it.

The man grunted, apparently satisfied with the exchange, and quickly tucked the money inside his shirt pocket. He jerked his head toward a door marked 'Employees Only'.

Hannibal nodded. "Spasibo." He said before turning away. "Will, come."

Will didn't need to be told twice. He scrambled quickly after Hannibal, following him through the door and down the set of concrete steps that lay beyond.

"You speak Russian?" He asked as they picked their way through the gloom. The air seemed to grow colder with every step they took, and the faint, musty scent of mildew was growing stronger the further down they went.

"Not well." Hannibal admitted. "When Lithuania was occupied by the Soviet Union, Russian was the primary language spoken in public. But given my family's status, I never had much use for it outside the classroom, and I've had even less use for it since I left. I'm afraid I'm a little out of practice."

"Well, you seem to know enough to get by." Will said, gesturing vaguely behind them.

"Enough for my purposes, I suppose."

The two of them fell silent again as they came to the base of the stairs, where they found another door waiting for them.

"I hope you know what you're getting us into." Will mumbled, eyeing it distrustfully. Hannibal didn't answer, but took Will's hand and gave it a brief squeeze before he reached out and grabbed the handle.

The door swung open with a creak, revealing a small storage room beyond. Wire shelving units stuffed with old computer manuals, sheafs of loose paper, and cardboard boxes of spare computer parts, extension cords, and cables lined one wall. Crammed into one corner was an ancient copy machine, and in the middle of the room, two rickety desks that had been pushed together and were piled with several different printers and computer monitors. Hunched behind one of them was a man who appeared to be a few years older than Hannibal. He didn't look up as they approached. Instead, he called out something in Russian.

“I’m afraid your associate is still upstairs, Mr. Ivanov.” Hannibal answered. “And, judging from what I saw up there, I would not expect your coffee anytime soon.”

The man finally looked up. He had small, watery eyes behind a pair of smudged and crooked glasses. His hair was graying, lank and greasy, and hung just above his shoulders. There was something about him that reminded Will of a rat, a feeling that wasn’t helped when, as soon as he saw Hannibal, his face split into a wide smile, revealing yellowed teeth.

“Ah!” He cried, rising to his feet. Though he wasn’t even half as tall as the man upstairs, he was just as wide. “Come in! Come, come! I’ve been expecting you!”

The longer he watched Yuri Ivanov, the more convinced Will became that there was something about him that he didn’t trust. Though why that was, he couldn’t say - the man was pleasant enough, and seemed determined to present himself as the perfect host to his guests, bustling about the cramped room and offering them tea as he unearthed two ancient folding chairs that had been wedged behind the copier. These he opened with a flourish, and only once Will and Hannibal were seated did he settle himself behind his desk, beaming at them.

“Welcome, gentlemen!” He said, “It’s a pleasure to finally meet you.”

“Yes, likewise.” Hannibal agreed with a smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “Though I regret our meeting couldn’t be under better circumstances.”

“Ah! But that’s not the nature of my business.” Yuri reminded him cheerfully. “A man who finds himself needing to disappear is almost never in ‘better circumstances’.”

Hannibal’s lip curled. “Very true.”

“And especially true in your case, it would seem.” Yuri continued suggestively. “Isn’t that right, Doctor?”

Will felt something ice cold wash over him at these words.

“You know who he is?” He said. ‘What he is’ seemed the more appropriate question to ask, but Will didn’t think Hannibal would appreciate that.

Yuri shrugged. “I watch the news.”

“Then...you know what he’s done.” Will clarified slowly. Yuri grinned back at him.

“And what you’ve done, Mr. Graham.” He said.

Will blinked, surprised. “You know me?”

“Oh yes.” Yuri assured him with an oily smile. “Hard to forget your pretty face.”

“Then you know I haven’t *done* anything.” Will spat.

“Nothing that you’ve been convicted of. But the FBI is very interested in finding you, Mr. Graham. And you’re clearly running from something.” Yuri cocked his head. “Or is it perhaps not that you’re running *from* something but toward someone? I assume you’ve heard what ‘TattleCrime’ has said about you two?”

Will flushed deep scarlet and Yuri chuckled at the sight.

“So shy, no?” He said, turning to Hannibal. “Tell me - is it true that people who blush easy make the best lovers?”

Some small muscle twitched in Hannibal's jaw. "I'm afraid I wouldn't know." He said coldly.

"No?" Yuri asked, sounding surprised. "I thought for sure you would have…taken a bite out of him - so to say - by now. I know I would."

"That's not-" Will sputtered. "We're not-it's-look, this isn't why we're here!"

"No, it's not." Yuri agreed. "Forgive me. I didn't mean to embarrass you."

"What's there to be embarrassed about?" Will asked through his teeth.

"Nothing at all." Yuri said lightly. "Who am I to judge a man for who he is? Or what he's done? I can't exactly claim innocence for myself, can I?" He asked, indicating the various computers before him. "And besides. That's not what I'm here for. I'm here to help you."

Will raised an eyebrow.

He had never heard anyone liken forgery to cannibalistic serial murder before.

And so casually at that.

'Slimy'. Will found himself thinking as he looked at Yuri. 'That's what you are - *slimy* .'

Whether it was because he could sense that Will's patience with the conversation was wearing thin or because he just didn't like where it was going, Hannibal quickly interjected, "Yes, well, we appreciate your…discretion."

“Of course.” Yuri said with a nod. “It’s an important part of our services, after all. Now then,” he said briskly, clapping his hands together before turning his attention to one of the monitors. “To business! What exactly will you be needing this time?”

—-------

They needed a picture of Hannibal for the passport.

So Yuri dug an old sheet out of one of the boxes and fastened it to the back of his office door. But it was so wrinkled and dirty, so obvious that Hannibal was standing in front of a sheet, that the idea was quickly scrapped.

Then Will suggested that they use the wall behind Yuri’s shelves, and together, they began to shift the various boxes and files that lined the racks, stacking them haphazardly on the desks, the copier, the floor, and even on the stairs outside the room until they finally had one of the units cleared. The shelves were easy to lift once they were empty, and though the office was small, they had just enough room to slide them apart, revealing the smooth white wall underneath.

“Much better!” Yuri said, snapping Hannibal’s picture. “Now this, I can use.”

“How long will it take for you to make everything?” Will asked as he moved the shelves back into place.

“An hour.” Yuri said from his computer, where he was busy uploading Hannibal’s picture. “Maybe two. You’ll be out of here before you know it.”

“Actually, we have reservations for dinner soon.” Hannibal said, taking a break from watching Will put the shelves back in order to check his watch. “Would you mind if we came back for it later?”

“Not at all!” Yuri told him. “Please, go! Enjoy yourselves. I’ll call you when I’m done.”

“Thank you.” Hannibal said, rising to his feet. “Will? Are you ready?”

Will had just turned around, ready to spit venom, when he accidently knocked over the files that had been stacked on the corner of Yuri’s desk. Papers spilled everywhere, scattering over the floor and vanishing under the furniture.

“Dammit!” Will cursed softly, dropping to his knees to gather them up.

“Don’t worry about it.” Yuri tried to tell him with a wave of his hand. “Really, Mr. Graham, it’s fine.”

“Yes, Will, please. We need to be there in ten minutes-”

“No. It would be rude to leave when there’s a mess to clean up.” Will said, glaring pointedly at Hannibal. “Right?”

Hannibal kept his face expressionless and his eyes on Will. “Yes.” He said after a moment. “You’re right. Mr. Ivanov, I apologize.”

Yuri continued to protest even as Hannibal crouched down to help Will collect the papers. Will ignored them both, still irritated, and began to grope under the desk for the documents that had fallen underneath. His fingers brushed cardboard and he frowned. He didn’t remember putting any of the boxes under the desk...

“Please don’t trouble yourselves.” Yuri was begging Hannibal weakly as Will grabbed the box and pulled it out - it was an old shoebox, the lid of which was missing. Odd. Even odder was the fact that it wasn’t holding a pair of shoes...

“It’s no trouble.” Hannibal assured him coolly, retrieving the last few pages and setting them aside. “Look, we’ve already finished.”

The box Will found was filled with Polaroids - dozens of them. Will picked one up, and stared at it, puzzled, not sure what he was looking at. He picked up another, and his stomach sank.

“Thank you.” Yuri said to Hannibal, shaking his hand. He sounded sheepish. “Thank you, but you really didn’t have to do that.”

“Of course we did.” Hannibal told him. “It would have been terribly impolite if we didn’t. Especially after you’ve been so helpful.”

“Thank you. I appreciate it. But please, go - I would not want you to miss your reservation because of me.”

“We’ll see you shortly.” Hannibal promised him. “Ready to go, Will? Will?”

But Will didn’t answer him. He continued to flip through the pictures, staring down at them in horror, his disgust mounting with each new image..

“Will? What’s wrong?” Hannibal called again, taking a step closer so that he could peer over Will’s shoulder. “What is that?”

Will held the pictures out to him silently, and Hannibal took them with a frown. His expression went terrifyingly blank as he studied the photos, and after a long, awkward pause, he raised his eyes to look at Yuri, who had gone very pale.

“This is an interesting collection you have, Mr. Ivanov.” Hannibal said lightly, turning one of the polaroids around so that the man could see what Hannibal was referring to - the picture was of a young boy, no older than twelve, staring up at the camera with wide and tear-filled eyes. He was dressed in only his underpants, and had his hands cupped protectively over his

groin, as if trying to cover himself. Yuri cringed, but Hannibal wasn't done. He held up another image - this one of a boy wearing a pair of jeans, but looking just as terrified and embarrassed as the last - and then another of a child no older than five, laying naked over a familiar, dirty sheet, his unfocused eyes staring vacantly ahead. "I'd love to hear the story behind these photos."

"Please, it's not what it looks like!" Yuri cried. "I can explain!"

"Please do." Hannibal said crisply, handing the pictures back to Will, who quickly dropped them back into the box.

"I...I help coach a local swim team!" Yuri explained quickly. "Those photos, they...we took those when we were getting the boys fitted for their swimsuits!"

A beat of silence passed. "I see." Hannibal said, his voice like ice. "Tell me, Mr. Ivanov - do you enjoy coaching?"

"Oh yes!" Yuri said, nodding enthusiastically. "Yes, very much."

"...Why?" Hannibal asked him, his hard eyes staring unblinkingly at Yuri.

"Be-because!" Yuri said, more than a little defensively. "It's rewarding to help a child."

"Hmm. 'Rewarding'." Hannibal mused, taking a leisurely step closer to Yuri. "And what exactly is your reward, Mr. Ivanov?"

"I don't-"

"Is it control, perhaps?" Hannibal asked, interrupting him. "I would imagine that when you... *coach* these boys, you expect them to obey you. And that there are consequences if they don't behave."

“Of course they listen to me!” Yuri sputtered indignantly. “I’m their coach-”

“Or perhaps your reward is something else?” Hannibal continued, as if he hadn’t heard him. “Something much more...physical?”

“What?! No! No, of course!” Yuri snapped. “I just enjoy helping the kids!”

Hannibal blinked once, long and slow, like a cat. “Does it make you feel powerful?” He asked quietly. “Is that why you enjoy it?”

The look on Yuri’s face was ugly. He was quiet for a long moment, glaring hatefully at Hannibal. “Who wouldn’t enjoy feeling powerful?” He asked eventually.

He said it softly, his voice like the dry hiss of snake scales over fallen leaves as it slithered on the forest floor, and Will shuddered at the sound, bile rising in his throat. But Hannibal remained unmoved, standing tall and proud before him, poised as ever. He regarded Yuri silently for a moment longer, his face betraying nothing, and then he very slowly turned toward Will.

“Will, dear.” He said. “Come along. We don’t want to be late for dinner, do we?”

“I think I lost my appetite.” Will muttered, setting the box aside and rising to his feet. Hannibal tutted at him, wrapping an arm around Will’s shoulders and drawing him close.

“I’m sure you’ll find it again.” He reassured Will quietly, guiding him to the door. As they passed Yuri, Will ducked his head, terrified of what he might find if their eyes met, of what his overly-impressionable mind might pick up.

Hannibal, however, looked directly at him, his mouth twisting into a small, enigmatic smile.

“It’s been a pleasure, Mr. Ivanov.” He said cheerfully. “I look forward to seeing you again...And your work.”

—-------

Will waited until they were in the car before he spoke again.

“I don’t like this.”

“Nor do I.” Hannibal admitted quietly. “But, unfortunately, it’s the only choice we have.”

“I thought you said most choices are an illusion.”

“...I’m afraid this one is not, Will.” Hannibal sighed as they pulled away.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! Please tell me what you think!

So I will be backpacking through a national park in 2 weeks. I don't plan on writing anything until I get back, so part 2 will probably be up by the end of June.

Stuff will be going DOWN!

But Your Evil is Coming Through

Chapter Summary

Things go from bad to worse for Hannibal and Will

Chapter Notes

Back much sooner than I thought!

First things first: Trigger Warning! Some people may find the content of this chapter (non-con/dub-con, assault, physical abuse, etc) upsetting/disturbing, so please read with caution.

Hope you enjoy!

Will couldn't really remember the drive from Yuri's bodega to the restaurant. One minute they were pulling away, and the next Hannibal was helping him from the car and guiding him inside. What happened in between was a bit of a blur. And what happened after, once they were inside, well…he was aware that he was following the host through the maze of tables and chairs, Hannibal close behind him, but world was strangely muted, and Will watched it all as if from a great distance, feeling oddly detached from himself and everything that was happening around him. Details came to him in snippets - candlelight, silk tablecloths, crystal glasses, upholstered seats, servers in white gloves, Hannibal speaking with their waiter in a meaningless jumble of French...none of it mattered. Will couldn't bring himself to care about any of it.

Because inside, he was screaming. Because Will had looked. Will had looked at those photographs and he saw everything and what he saw was too much. He saw the terror in those boys' eyes and now it was his and he was drowning in it the way they had and were drowning in it, a tortuous loop from which he couldn't escape.

It was easy to imagine what must have happened - Yuri luring them inside with treats of candy and soda, gifts of baseball and gaming cards. He would have been patient, spending weeks, maybe even months, building their trust. He would have modeled himself as the perfect friend, a father figure, an older brother, whatever it was the boys needed most, inviting them to come after school and weekends, letting them play on his computers, encouraging them to confide in him. The first time Yuri convinced them to undress, they would have done so without a second thought - maybe it was a hot day, maybe they had spilled something on their clothes. And because the first time, Yuri would have only looked...

But the second time…and the third time…

Will felt his breath hitch and the bile fill his throat. He knew that he was shaking, but he was powerless to do anything about it - all he could do was sit there as he slowly fell apart, as helpless as the boys had been the first time Yuri touched them. They would have been so confused, so scared, and because they had been, so was Will now. The fear was crippling, paralyzing, all-consuming. His heart was pounding painfully against his chest. He could barely breathe, couldn't draw the air he needed, couldn't move, unable to escape, no -

He jumped when he felt Hannibal's hand take his, and looked wildly up to find Hannibal's dark eyes staring calmly back.

"Don't go where I can't follow, Will." Hannibal said softly. His thumb brushed lightly back and forth across Will's knuckles, grounding him. "Stay here. With me."

Will swallowed thickly around the silent scream still lodged in his throat. "He hurt them." He managed. "You saw what he did to them, Hannibal. They didn't know any better, it wasn't their fault. They trusted him and they were so scared, they didn't understand why it was happening, they didn't-"

"Shh." Though he said it sharply, his hand was gentle when he squeezed Will's. Then, reaching over, Hannibal took a glass of amber liquid and held it out for him. "Here, drink this. It will help."

"What is it?" Will asked, eyeing it with distrust. He couldn't remember Hannibal ordering it. Couldn't remember it arriving.

“It’s brandy.” Hannibal reassured him, bringing the rim of the glass closer to Will’s lips. “Come on, just a few sips, that’s it. Good boy.”

It burned going down, but the moment the liquor hit Will’s tongue it began to seep into his veins, warming him instantly and dragging him mercilessly from the dark labyrinth of his mind and back into reality.

Will wasn’t sure it was much better.

He glanced nervously at Hannibal, who was still watching him.

“What are you going to do to him?” He blurted out before he could stop himself. He blamed the alcohol.

Hannibal raised an eyebrow. “It depends. What would you like me to do to him, Will?”

“Nothing!” Will hissed. “I don’t want you to do anything!”

“Don’t lie, Will.” Hannibal said. Over the flickering light of the candle between them, his eyes seemed more red than usual. “I know that’s not what you want.”

“What I want is for us to avoid attracting any attention to ourselves.” Will told him through his teeth. “Right now, Jack doesn’t know that we’re alive. And even if he suspects it, he has no idea where we are. That changes the moment you kill Yuri - he’ll know and he’ll come looking for us.”

“But if we let him live, then what will happen to all those boys, Will?” Hannibal asked him. “The ones Yuri has already assaulted and will continue to assault unless we intervene? What about all the boys he hasn’t had the chance to hurt yet? We can save them, Will. You know

we can - easily." He paused. "Or are you really so willing to sacrifice them for your own freedom?"

"Stop it, Hannibal!"

"He's only touching them right now." Hannibal mused, as if he hadn't heard him, as if Will hadn't spoken at all. "Taking pictures. He hasn't actually done anything to them yet, Will, because he can't - he can't maintain an erection, much less penetrate them. But I doubt that just touching them is enough for him...I wonder if he won't escalate...if he won't find relief by some other means…"

"He's too old to start killing now." Will snapped. "You know that."

"The only thing I know with certainty is that nothing in this life is certain." Hannibal quoted airily, before taking a sip of his wine. "You know perfectly well that a serial killer may be born at any time. They just need the right...push...to get them started." His eyes found Will's. "Isn't that right, Will?"

Will glared at him.

"We're not talking about me." He snapped. "We're talking about you and what you're planning to do."

"I'm not planning on doing anything." Hannibal told him. "But I am curious, Will - what would *you* do? If you were given the chance?"

"No, I'm not playing this game-"

"Would it be violent?" Hannibal asked. His eyes were gleaming, his voice no more than a whisper. "Would you make him suffer? The way he made those boys suffer?"

“I’m not-”

“You see it so easily, don’t you, Will? What it must have been like for them. How scared they were, how convinced they were that they had done something wrong. Just like you know how scared they still are - what it’s done to them, how ruined they are now. You know exactly, don’t you, Will, because you know what it’s like to be so lost and scared, so helpless. You were once just like them and in many ways you’re still like them, aren’t you? Will you sleep tonight, do you think? If you do, will you have nightmares? When you dream, will you see their faces, see what they saw, feel their fear, their pain, or will it be something else? And even if you don’t tonight, surely they will haunt you in the nights to come, for who knows how long, especially when you knew they had been hurt and you could have saved them, but you chose not to-”

Will slammed his fist against the table with enough force that the glasses rattled, and the quiet chatter that surrounded them instantly went silent. He ignored the dozens of eyes now looking curiously his way, and instead kept his gaze locked on Hannibal. Though Hannibal’s face was its usual expressionless mask, Will could feel his anticipation, his excitement, simmering beneath the surface, and he inhaled, long and slow, to both steady and steel himself against the emotion that wasn't his, that was threatening to take him over.

“You really want to know what I would do?” He whispered.

Hannibal smiled. Stupid question. “Very much.”

Will heaved another shuddering breath. “I’d neuter him.” He said, in a voice he didn’t recognize - harsh and low, nothing like his own. “And I’d make sure there was nothing left when I was done.”

Hannibal nodded. “Poetic.” He said as he swirled his wine. “But predictable. I expected more from you, Will-”

“I’d make him watch.” Will quickly elaborated. “I’d make sure he could see everything I was doing to him. Feel everything. And there would be nothing he could do to stop me from cutting him to ribbons. Slowly. And every piece I’d shave off I’d force him to swallow. Until there was nothing left. Until he bled out or choked to death - whichever came first.”

Hannibal made a sound then, and Will wasn't sure if it was a gasp or a sigh. It was a small sound. A happy one.

"Beautiful." He praised quietly, staring intently out across the short distance that separated them. "Beautiful, Will." Hannibal leaned closer over the table. "Would you like to see your vision realized?"

"No." Will spat.

"Are you sure?" Hannibal pressed him. "You've seemed to have given it considerable thought. It would be a shame to waste it."

Will chuckled mirthlessly. "If only you knew the kinds of thoughts I've wasted on you."

"I would love to, darling." Hannibal purred. "...But not tonight. Tonight, I have something else in mind for us."

"Hannibal, please don't!" Will begged him. "Can't you see I don't want this?!"

"But you do want this." Hannibal persisted, frowning at him. "I know you do."

"No, I don't!" Will protested. "This isn't something I want - I'm not like you!"

"Still in denial about what you are?" Hannibal sighed. "Oh, Will, and here I thought we had made such progress."

Will shook his head, feeling desperate. "No! No! No!" He hissed, seizing Hannibal's wrist. "Please, just listen to me! For once, just listen to me! We can't afford to go after Yuri!"

“Yes, we can-”

“No, we can’t! As much as I want to, we can't - it’s too dangerous! Don’t you get it?! I don’t care about Yuri or what happens to him! I don’t care about making him suffer for what he’s done! I don’t care about any of it! I care about you and me and us getting out of here! That’s what I want! Okay?! That’s all!”

“Will-”

“And I know that’s wrong and it’s so awful I shouldn’t even say it but I don’t care - let Yuri go, let the whole world burn for all I care, just as long as I have you with me!”

Will couldn’t remember Hannibal ever looking so shocked. “Will…”

“Don’t!” Will said. “Please, don’t, not now! Please! I can’t! I can’t do it!”

“Alright.” Hannibal said quietly, pulling himself free from Will’s shaking grasp so that he could take his hands in his. “Alright. I won’t do anything to him, Will, I promise. Just calm down. It’s alright.”

Will sucked in a few shaky breaths before Hannibal insisted that he take another drink. He swallowed a mouthful of the brandy and then another, desperately trying to numb himself as quickly as possible.

“Are you feeling any better?” Hannibal asked when he set the empty glass aside. Will shrugged, avoiding his eyes.

“Our food should be out soon. Are you hungry?”

Will shook his head. His stomach was still in disgusted knots, still too filled with the dread and terror Will had borrowed from the boys to be filled with much of anything else.

“Can you try to eat something? For me?”

Will sighed. He didn’t want to. But if Hannibal was willing to make concessions for him, the least he could do was the same. So he nodded, and Hannibal sat back with a sigh.

“You’re starting to worry me, Will.” Hannibal informed him then. “You’re not eating enough.”

“You don’t get worried.” Will reminded him miserably.

“I do when it comes to you.” Hannibal said, studying Will with a critical eye. He frowned slightly. “Maybe I should ask Chiyoh to pick up some Ensure for you.”

“Buy as much as you want.” Will snapped. “I won’t drink it.”

“Don’t be difficult, Will.”

“I’m not. I’m just being myself.”

Hannibal smiled slightly, a small flicker of movement, and then it suddenly inverted.

“I watched my sister starve when I was a child, Will.” He explained softly. “And there was nothing I could do to help her. I won’t see the same happen to you.”

“Stop being dramatic. I’m not gonna *starve* .” Will huffed grumpily.

“I know you’re not. Because I won’t let you.”

“And you say I worry too much.” Will muttered.

“And you say I don’t worry at all.” Hannibal countered with a smirk, and despite himself, Will laughed.

“You know,” He said, grinning. “Sometimes I think it’s a miracle you haven’t driven me completely crazy yet.”

“It’s hardly a miracle.” Hannibal told him. “Having you lose your mind was never my intention, Will.”

“Coulda fooled me.”

Hannibal cocked his head. “Don’t you understand?” He asked quietly, almost reverently. “Your mind is the most beautiful thing I’ve ever encountered. It’s not your intact sanity that’s miraculous, Will - it’s you. Just you.”

Will felt himself flush. “I’m not-”

“You are.” Hannibal insisted, more forcefully this time. “You’re perfect.”

Will shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “Please stop saying stuff like that.”

“Why?”

“Because.” Will sputtered, fingers twisting around the napkin on his lap. “I’m not. I’m not miraculous or perfect or whatever you and everybody else thinks I am. I’m-I’m not... *good* , Hannibal. I tried to be. I tried so hard for so long but I’m not. And I never will be. So stop saying that I am.”

Hannibal leaned closer, staring at Will intently. “I never said you were ‘good’, Will. Because I know you’re not. I’m well aware you’re not. And I know you wish you were and that you tried to be, but the fact is that you’re just not. Far from it - because for how much compassion you’re capable of, at your core, your heart is cold. Empty. Because you don’t have any true feelings of your own - only someone else’s.”

Will looked away, ashamed, but Hannibal reached out and curled a finger under his chin, forcing him to look back up. “Beautiful, remarkable boy. Don’t you see?” He whispered. “What you are, what you’re capable of - that’s precisely why I love you. You’re nothing short of exquisite - exactly as you are.” So saying, he then took Will’s hand in his and kissed it.

Will pulled away. “You only love me because I’m a mirror of you.” He said bitterly. “It’s not me you love. It’s the part of yourself that I’m reflecting.”

Hannibal shook his head. “I do love you for that reason, Will, but that doesn’t mean I don’t love *you* for exactly who you are. There’s no one else like you in the world, Will. No one who can do what you can. No one else who could ever understand me the way you do. You’re the only one. That’s what makes you my everything, Will. And there isn’t anything I wouldn’t do to keep you with me forever.”

Will was far too stunned by these words to answer him, but luckily, the arrival of their dinner spared him from having to. Hannibal released him reluctantly as the dishes were set before them.

“Coq au vin.” He proclaimed, beaming. “With a side of tartiflette. Enjoy.”

Will quickly translated the words in his head, studying the bowl before him. “Chicken soup.” He surmised flatly. “You ordered me chicken soup.”

Hannibal shrugged, looking a bit put out. “I seem to remember you enjoying it the last time you had it.”

“Yeah, but you made it then.” Will whined, hoping that if he could appeal to Hannibal’s vanity, then he wouldn’t make him eat.

Hannibal seemed amused. “I can assure you that whoever made this is just as talented a cook, if not more so, than I am.”

“Hannibal, I can’t eat all this.” Will tried then, but Hannibal remained unmoved.

“You don’t have to eat all of it, Will.” He told him. “Just try a few bites.”

Will’s stomach roiled at just the thought of it, and he pushed the food around his plate.

“Will.”

Will winced. Very unwillingly, he scooped a small piece of chicken onto his spoon and raised it to his mouth. He chewed it slowly, swallowing it down past his resisting throat. It was good, but his stomach didn’t want it. Just the thought of eating more nearly brought it back up again. He glanced over and found Hannibal still watching him expectantly.

Will swallowed thickly, and, eager for something, anything, to distract him, quickly blurted out, “You said you starved as a child.”

“Yes.” Hannibal said slowly.

“You never told me that before.”

Hannibal finally looked away from him then. For a moment, Will thought he wasn't going to answer.

"It was a long winter." He said at last. "We were running low on food and supplies to begin with, but after my parents died...I did everything I could, but there wasn't much I could do. I tried...Everything we had I gave to Mischa. But in the end, it wasn't enough." His eyes narrowed slightly. "It was a long time before I finally ate again."

Will stared at him. No, Hannibal had never told him this before.

"And what was it you ate?" Will asked him hesitatingly. "When you finally had food again?"

"...I can't remember." Hannibal admitted eventually. "That first meal - I can't remember it."

Will felt his skin prickle uneasily and he shivered. There was something there, something big, and he was pretty sure he knew what it was, but no way was he going to try and pull it apart now. "And after?"

Hannibal chuckled. "The things I ate after I was found and brought to the orphanage I would prefer to forget - mostly porridge and soup."

"Nothing good, I take it."

"No." Hannibal said with a smile. "Not at all."

Will considered him, then took another small sip of the broth. It went down easier than the last one. "How long were you in the orphanage?"

"A few years. It took my Uncle Robertus a while to find me, and almost just as long to get me out. The Iron Curtain and its red tape was nearly impossible to get through at the time."

Will nodded. Took another bite. “But it got better after he adopted you.”

“It did.” Hannibal agreed. “However briefly.”

Something dark and bitter flickered across his gaze, but it was gone before Will could get a proper look at it.

“And what about you, Will?” Hannibal asked then. “You told me you were poor growing up. Did you starve as well?”

“Not as bad as you, I don’t think.” Will told him, taking another bite of his meal. “But there were times I went without.”

“And what was it you ate?” Hannibal wanted to know. “When the money finally came in and you could afford it, what would you have?”

Will snorted mirthlessly. “Sandwich bread and peanut butter. Kraft Mac and Cheese. McDonald’s. Are you horrified yet?”

“Beyond words.” Hannibal said with a smirk. “Poor boy, I had no idea you were so abused. However did you survive?”

“Wasn’t easy.” Will grinned. “Not sure how I did it.” He paused before shyly adding. “But it probably wasn’t nearly as graceful as you.”

“My survival was anything but graceful.” Hannibal told him with a wicked smile. “Quite the opposite, I assure you.”

For the first time since they'd arrived, Will's stomach growled, demanding, and he quickly silenced it with another swallow of soup. "Will you tell me about it?"

"Maybe someday, mylimasis."

Will huffed at him. "You know what they say about 'someday', don't you?"

"What's that?"

"That it's really just another word for 'never'."

Hannibal was quiet for a long time after that.

"It means 'beloved'."

Will frowned at him. "What?" He asked, confused.

"Mylimasis. It's Lithuanian for 'beloved'." Hannibal told him, and when Will blinked at him, lost, he continued, "I promised I'd tell you what it meant one day, didn't I? That day is today."

"Oh." Will mumbled, blushing furiously, and Hannibal smiled at him.

"I promise I'll tell you about it someday, Will. I'll tell you everything...just not tonight. But don't fret, darling. We have our whole lives ahead of us, after all..."

Will stared at Yuri's corner store and felt a cold ball of dread settle deep within his stomach. The lights were out. There were bars on the door that matched the ones in the windows. It looked deserted.

"Did he...leave?" He asked, glancing over at Hannibal, who was studying the shop with narrowed eyes.

"I doubt it." Hannibal said. "He knew we were coming back."

"Yeah, but that was before…" Will trailed off hesitantly. A horrible thought had just dawned on him. "You don't think he went to the police, do you?"

"If he did, he would be putting himself in a very awkward situation." Hannibal drawled. "Between his illegal business, his ties with Russia, and the pedophilia, he would certainly have a lot to explain."

"He could have called in anonymously." Will pointed out.

"Will, please." Hannibal scoffed. "Who would actually believe an anonymous caller claiming to have seen us at a convenience store in Atlanta?"

"Jack would." Will reminded him impatiently. "And he's obsessed enough that he would actually come down here and check for himself."

"Yuri didn't call the police." Hannibal said firmly, opening his door and unfolding himself from the car. "It goes against his interests. Stay here."

"Yeah right." Will snarled, scrambling after him. "What are you doing?"

“I would have thought my intention was fairly obvious, Will.” Hannibal called over his shoulder as he reached for the door. “Even to someone without your gift. I’m seeing if anyone is inside.”

“You’re wasting your-”

But the moment Hannibal touched the door, it opened, and the bars rolled smoothly up their track when he stooped to grab them. Will blinked.

Yuri hadn’t locked it.

He had just made it look like he had.

‘Trap.’ Was the first thing that sprang to Will’s mind when he saw the darkness that lay waiting for them beyond the open door. ‘This is a trap.’

“Hannibal.” He hissed aloud, seizing his arm. “Wait!”

Hannibal turned and leveled him with a terrifyingly blank look. “Go back to the car, Will.” He said slowly.

“No way!” Will snapped, tightening his hold and taking another step closer to Hannibal. “I’m not leaving you alone with him.”

“Oh, Will. I’m touched.”

“Don’t be - it’s not you I’m worried about.”

He had been hoping to knock Hannibal down a peg. Instead, he seemed flattered.

“Very well.” He said, his expression thawing slightly. “But stay by me.”

“Obviously.” Will muttered, following him inside.

It wasn’t as dark inside as it appeared to be from the street - behind the checkout counter at the back of the shop, Yuri sat completing a crossword puzzle by the single light he had left on. He looked up at Will and Hannibal as they approached.

“Oh.” He said. “You’re back.”

It was the simple, matter-of-fact way he said it that made Will nervous. Earlier, Yuri had been practically tripping over himself trying to please them - gracious to the point of being downright annoying. But now...now it was like he didn’t particularly care about them one way or another.

“We are.” Hannibal confirmed as they came closer.

“How was your dinner?” Again, in that same, slightly disinterested way as before.

“It was excellent, thank you.” Hannibal said upon reaching the counter. Will hung slightly back, and did everything he could to avoid looking at Yuri. The last thing he wanted was to catch Yuri’s way of thinking. “Is everything ready?”

“I have everything you need.” Yuri promised Hannibal, reaching under the counter. Will jerked back, convinced he was about to pull out a gun. Instead, Yuri pulled out a beautifully carved wooden box. He set it in front of Hannibal and opened it to reveal a stack of documents inside. He picked up the top sheet and laid it delicately on the table for Hannibal to see. “Birth certificate - ”

“Russia?” Hannibal asked him, raising an eyebrow.

Yuri shrugged. “Forgive me, but I took a few liberties with these. It’s fairly obvious you weren’t born here, and I find that the best lies are those rooted in truth.”

“I’m Lithuanian.” Hannibal informed him flatly.

“Close enough.” Yuri said, waving a dismissive hand. “Lithuania was occupied by Russia for so long that it’s practically the same place.”

It was obvious that Hannibal didn’t agree with this statement in the slightest, but rather than say so, he simply nodded, and allowed Yuri to continue.

“Now from here, we have a couple different options.” Yuri explained. He had removed the rest of the documents from the box and had separated them into two different piles. “You can either present yourself as a Russian citizen, in which case, everything you need is here,” He indicated the first pile, “Or, as an American immigrant” He gestured toward the slightly larger stack of pages. “Obviously, there are pros and cons to each, but if you decide you prefer having the American citizenship, there will be some additional paperwork that you’ll need…”

Will drifted away as Yuri began to review the particulars of everything with Hannibal, weaving carefully in between the store’s tight aisles toward the front. It was a tiny, cramped sort of space; difficult to navigate the first time they had passed through and almost impossible now in the dark. When Will nearly knocked over a wire rack of snacks, he bit back a curse.

“Why did you turn the lights off?” He called out irritably as he straightened it back into place.

“I thought it best to make it appear as if the shop was closed, Mr. Graham.” Yuri replied smoothly. “I would hate for someone to come wandering in and interrupt us - don’t you agree?”

Will paused, considering. He didn't think Yuri was lying, but he was pretty sure there was more to the explanation that he wasn't saying. He moved farther away, closer to the door.

"Where's your friend?" He asked next, glancing toward the shadowed corners and wondering why Yuri had decided to meet them up here, alone, rather than his office down below. If the bodega was supposed to be a front, why would he risk exposing it?

"My friend?" Yuri echoed, sounding puzzled.

"Big guy." Will said. "He was working the counter when we came in earlier. Real friendly."

"Oh." Yuri grunted. "Boris. Yes, I sent him home."

"Why?"

"He's not involved with this side of the operation." Yuri told him. "No point in making him stay."

"Yeah?" Will asked, still suspicious. "And what exactly is his job in this?"

"Put it to you this way, Mr. Graham." Yuri said with a smirk. "I could get a German Shepherd to do his job and it would be the smarter of the two. But the dog wouldn't be nearly as loyal."

"Hmm." Will hummed, thinking. If Yuri was willing to meet them alone after their… disagreement, knowing that one of them was a serial killer and that they were both wanted by the FBI, then he was clearly confident that he was safe with them. Will just didn't understand why.

‘Because he has something we need.’ His brain supplied helpfully. ‘And it’s something we can’t just get anywhere. So he knows we can’t kill him…’

But surely Yuri was smart enough to realize that as soon as Hannibal had the documents, Yuri would become a loose end. And there would be nothing to protect Yuri from them, then.

‘What do you know that we don’t?’ Will wondered as he finally reached the front door. Behind him, Hannibal and Yuri continued to talk, their heads bent close together over the counter as they examined the documents. Will craned his neck to look back at them, and with a jolt, realized there was a camera hidden in the shelves behind the counter, pointed straight at Hannibal.

‘Don’t panic.’ He told himself firmly. ‘You don’t even know it’s on. It’s probably just insurance.’

Will glanced around the store, and could make out at least one other camera in the gloom, but he was sure that there were more. He quickly wedged himself into a dark corner near the door and stood watching Hannibal and Yuri for a few moments before he turned his attention toward the windows, squinting. The streets were eerily empty despite how early it still was, and the only working streetlamp was a block away. Will felt himself growing more and more anxious the longer he looked and the less he saw. He didn’t like this. He didn’t like it all. The whole thing felt like a set-up.

‘That’s probably because it is.’ Will found himself thinking bitterly. ‘Yuri’s acting completely different than he was before - something’s not right.’

Will’s mind raced, trying to understand what had changed since they’d left. Yuri was way too calm, too sure of himself, for someone who had just been caught in such a compromising position and threatened by the country’s most infamous serial killer. And they had been gone for almost two hours - that was more than enough time for him to prepare for their return. The question was, just what exactly had he done? The more he thought about it, the more convinced Will became that Yuri had called someone.

‘The FBI couldn’t get here that fast.’ He reminded himself. ‘...But they could be coordinating with local authorities.’

“Excellent choice.” He distantly heard Yuri praise from across the shop. “That’s what I would have chosen for myself if I was in your position-”

“Yuri had Hannibal’s picture.’ Will remembered. ‘He probably had video footage of us in the store. He could have easily proven to the police we were here.’

“Your work is most impressive.” Hannibal was saying. “I’ve never seen anything like it-”

‘The first thing they would have done was set up a perimeter, surveillance.’ Will thought. ‘They’ve probably blocked off the street. Have their men stationed in the cars parked outside. A SWAT team in position...they’re just waiting for the right moment…’

But a part of Will knew that Hannibal was right - Yuri couldn’t have called the police. Because even if they did cut him some kind of deal for turning them in, they couldn’t completely overlook the fact that Yuri was a criminal. They would still arrest him. They would still charge him. And even if he got a reduced sentence, he would still be expected to serve some time.

‘So what is it?’ Will wondered. ‘You’ve done something... what is it you’ve done, you bastard?’

“That’s not what we agreed.”

Will looked over sharply at Hannibal’s tone.

“Dr. Lecter, please try to understand.” Yuri answered calmly. “The original price was before I knew who I was helping - there is a great risk involved with undertaking you as a client, given the circumstances.”

“Perhaps I’m wrong,” Hannibal said, “but I seem to recall you saying that unfortunate circumstances are what keep your business running. Surely you’ve served people who were wanted by the police before.”

“Almost exclusively.” Yuri confirmed airily.

“And why should I be an exception?”

“Because I’m making an exception for *you* , Dr. Lecter.” Yuri pointed out with a shrug. “Normally, I wouldn’t accept someone as high profile as you as a client - it’s only fair that the final price reflects the risk I’m taking to help you. Not to mention,” He continued, “I’ve put considerable work into your product. I don’t typically do this much for anyone.” He said, nodding at the two stacks of documents. “I simply want to be compensated accordingly.” There was a slight pause. “Or maybe,” Yuri said, slowly raising his eyes to meet Hannibal’s. “I just enjoy feeling powerful.”

Will’s blood went ice cold at those words, and he quickly looked at Hannibal, fearing the worst. But he couldn’t see his face. Hannibal had his back to him. Will had no idea what he was going to do next, but he doubted it would be anything good. He took a few steps closer, trying to get a better sense of what was happening, of what Hannibal was going to do-

“Stay right there, Will.”

It was the way he said it that made Will stop, his eyes darting nervously from the smirk on Yuri’s frog-like face to Hannibal’s ramrod straight stance. Will watched as he leaned forward, closer to Yuri, and began to speak to him in low, quick Russian. Yuri listened with a frown, rattled off something in return, and fell silent again to hear Hannibal’s answer. The two went back and forth for what felt like an eternity before Yuri finally shook his head.

“I’m sorry.” He said firmly, raising a hand as if to silence Hannibal. “But that’s my final price. Take it or leave it.”

Hannibal didn’t move for a long time after that. And then he nodded. Just once.

“You drive a hard bargain, Mr. Ivanov.” He murmured. “I’m afraid I’ll need some time to consider it.” So saying, he offered Yuri his hand. “It’s been a pleasure doing business with you.”

Yuri seemed surprised by the gesture, and he hesitated for just a moment before accepting Hannibal’s hand. It was only then that Hannibal finally turned away from him.

“Will.” He said. “Come.”

Will knew better than to argue with him. He kept his mouth shut and his head down as Hannibal ushered him back outside.

“Hannibal?” He asked nervously once they were inside the car. “What happened?”

Hannibal shook his head and started the car. “Yuri broke our agreement.” He said tightly. “He’s changing his price.”

“Yeah, I heard that part.” Will said impatiently as they pulled away. “I don’t understand - can’t you afford it?”

“This isn’t about *money* , Will.” Hannibal snapped. “I assure you, I could very easily give him what he wants.”

“Then what’s the problem?!” Will asked, bewildered.

“The problem,” Hannibal said testily. “Is that what Yuri has asked for offends me so deeply that I cannot possibly put it into words.”

“Oh, for God’s sake-”

“He was unbearably rude.” Hannibal murmured to himself, and Will looked over at him, his heart sinking.

“No.” He whispered. “No, no, no! Hannibal, no - you promised!”

“Be quiet, Will.”

“Hannibal, please! What are you gonna do?!”

“I’m going to take you to the hotel.” Hannibal answered calmly. “And then I’m coming back here to deal with Yuri.”

“No!” Will shouted. “Stop the car! Hannibal, stop the car!”

“That’s enough, Will.”

“Jesus Christ! What the hell did he say to you?!”

Hannibal refused to answer him, his jaw clenched tightly shut and his knuckles white against the steering wheel of the car.

“Hannibal, please! Please, just talk to me! Hannibal!”

“I need you to be quiet, Will.” Hannibal repeated, just as calmly as he had before. “And do exactly as I say.”

“I’m not doing jack shit for you until you tell me what’s going on!”

“It’s very simple - Yuri broke our agreement, and in doing so, has insulted me. And now, I’m going to rectify the matter.”

“You don’t have to do this!” Will screamed at him. “We talked about this! If you kill him, you’re risking everything, and for what?! Please, don’t do it - you promised me you wouldn’t!”

Hannibal sighed. “I’m sorry, Will.” He said quietly. “But I can’t keep my promise.”

“Hannibal-!”

“But I am promising you now,” He continued. “That I will make sure this won’t be traced back to us.”

“You can’t promise me something like that!”

“I can.” Hannibal assured him. His voice was low, dark. Deadly. “Because when I’m done with him, there won’t be anything left of Yuri Ivanov at all.”

Will finally gave up trying to convince Hannibal to tell him what had happened with Yuri, realizing about halfway back to the hotel that it was a lost cause. So rather than waste his breath, he spent the remainder of the drive completely silent, his arms folded over his chest and scowling out his window. The fact that Hannibal seemed so calm despite everything that had happened only made him all the angrier, and as soon as they reached the hotel and Hannibal had parked the car, Will grabbed the door handle and yanked it back, eager to get away from him.

But nothing happened - the door remained firmly shut and locked.

He tried again, not as forcefully as he had before, and got the same result.

“Let me out.” He said, refusing to look at Hannibal.

“Not until we come to an agreement about what’s going to happen next.”

“I’m not agreeing,” Will growled, “To *anything* you say. Now let me out.”

“No.”

With a snarl, Will whipped around and pulled his fist back, but Hannibal snatched his wrist and shoved him against his seat before he had the chance to punch him. Will gasped and struggled, but no matter how hard he fought, he couldn’t get free from Hannibal’s grasp.

“We can do this the hard way or the easy way, Will.” Hannibal told him calmly. “You can either cooperate and come back to the room with me on your own, or I can force you. But either way, you’re going. So which is it going to be?”

“Yeah, good luck with that.” Will said hatefully. “I won’t go back without a fight, and I have a feeling people will notice if you have to drag me back to the room kicking and screaming. Or do people not pay attention to domestic abuse in homosexual relationships, Dr. Lecter?”

Hannibal didn’t answer him. Instead, he simply pressed his arm over Will’s throat, slowly increasing the pressure until Will began to choke.

“You can lose consciousness after three minutes of oxygen deprivation. Sometimes, it’s even less.” Hannibal explained conversationally while Will’s hands scrabbled frantically against him. “A blow to the head can render the same result, but I would prefer not to give you a

concussion. Once you're unconscious, I only need to carry you back to the room and lock you inside. If anyone asks, I'll simply tell them that you had too much to drink at dinner."

Will was beginning to see dark spots in his vision. He sputtered, twisting in his seat, and clawed weakly at Hannibal, trying to get him to let go.

"Does that sound agreeable to you, Will?"

Will shook his head. He was beginning to feel lightheaded.

"No? Does this mean you'll cooperate? You'll do what I say? Without a fight?"

Will nodded weakly. He was slumped in his seat. His fingers were numb. The dark spots were expanding. He was going to -

Hannibal loosened his grip.

"Breathe, Will." He murmured, massaging Will's chest as he began to cough. "It's alright. Just breathe."

Will sucked in a few shaky breaths. It took him a minute before he could speak again. "F-fuck you." He gasped, pulling away from Hannibal as much as he could.

"Now, now." Hannibal tutted. "There's no need for that, dear."

Hannibal helped him from the car and kept a tight grip on Will as he escorted him back to their room. When he finally got the door unlocked and open, he grabbed Will without warning.

“Gyah!” Will gasped as Hannibal threw him over his shoulder. “What are you doing?!”

“Stop squirming, Will.” Hannibal said as he carried Will down the hall and into the bedroom. “I would hate to drop you.”

Hannibal dropped him anyway - gently, on the bed. And then he was climbing on top of him, pinning him down before Will had the chance to right himself.

“What are you doing?” Will shouted as Hannibal quickly stripped him of his shoes and socks. “What the hell are you doing?!”

“Call it a precaution.” Hannibal said coolly, taking Will’s shoes to his closet and tossing them inside. Will watched in horror as Hannibal locked the cabinet shut and dropped the key into his pocket.

“While I’m gone, I want you to stay here, Will.” He said, finally turning to look at him.

“No!” Will begged him, scrambling to his bare feet. “Hannibal, please don’t!”

“Shh.” Hannibal cooed, catching Will in his arms as he stumbled forward. “I’ll be back before you know it. Everything will be fine, Will.”

Will shook his head, frantic. “No, it won’t!” He cried. “You’re gonna get us caught-”

“I won’t.” Hannibal told him. “I promise.”

“You never keep your promises to me! All you ever do is lie to me!”

“I’m not lying to you, Will.” Hannibal said gently as he kissed Will on the forehead. “I’m going to take care of this. And once I do, we can finally start over. Just you and me, together. You just have to trust me.”

He began to pull away. And because Will knew there was nothing he could say to change his mind, that he had nothing else to bargain with, nothing else to offer, he did the only thing he could to make Hannibal stay.

Will tilted his head.

And pressed his lips to Hannibal’s.

Hannibal went completely still the instant their lips met. For several long moments, he seemed too stunned to do much else than stand there, staring down at Will with wide, shocked eyes. Then he blinked, the spell broke, and he pulled away.

“Will?” He asked. He sounded concerned. “What are you doing?”

Rather than answer, Will tried to kiss him again, but Hannibal grabbed him before he could. “Will.” He said, more firmly this time. “What are you doing?”

Will swallowed dryly. “Isn’t this what you want?” He asked. His voice was shaking. “I thought this was what you wanted.”

“I want it more than anything.” Hannibal hissed, releasing Will abruptly and taking a step away from him. “But not like this - never like this. I want you to want it too.”

“I *do* want this.” Will insisted, grabbing at his shirt. He fumbled with the buttons. Ripped them off. They went scattering across the floor. “Let me show you...let me show you how bad I want it…”

He kissed Hannibal again, but it was like kissing a statue - Hannibal didn't move, didn't return the kiss, didn't react to it or him at all. Instead, he stared at Will with narrowed eyes, his face a cold, expressionless mask. Desperate, Will pressed against him harder, sucking and nibbling at his lower lip, trying to get him to reciprocate, to open his mouth, to do something, and when Hannibal still refused, he began to pepper his jaw and throat with small, shy kisses, hoping Hannibal would respond somehow, someway.

He didn't. Hannibal remained motionless throughout it all, utterly indifferent to Will and what he was doing.

Will bit his lip. He didn't understand what he was doing wrong. Hannibal had only told him about a hundred different times a hundred different ways how much he loved him, how much he wanted him - so why was he acting this way? Will couldn't figure it out - Hannibal was completely closed off to him. He couldn't tell he was thinking, what he was feeling, and Will doubted that was going to change anytime soon. Will racked his brains. The whole thing felt like a test.

Not sure what else to do, Will switched tactics. With shaking hands, he reached for Hannibal's shirt, pulling clumsily at the buttons, but Hannibal stopped him before he could get them undone. Will winced when Hannibal grabbed his wrists and slowly forced them down, away from him. When he let him go, Will glanced up at him nervously, afraid he may have crossed a line. Hannibal stared back for a long moment. And then he reached for Will.

Without a word, he slowly undid Will's pants and tugged them down, silently encouraging Will to step out of them. Once he had, Hannibal took a small step back and studied him with clinical coldness. Will shivered in the winter air and resisted the urge to cover himself, feeling unbearably exposed in just his underwear while Hannibal stood fully clothed and glaring in front of him.

Then Hannibal shoved him down onto the bed.

Will gasped, but forced himself to remain still as Hannibal climbed on top of him. He was staring down at him without so much as a hint of feeling, and Will trembled under his cold, dead gaze, remembering the last time Hannibal looked at him like that, and the agony that followed. His heart was beating wildly, fearfully in his chest when Hannibal slipped his hand beneath the waistband of his boxers. He cupped Will in his palm.

Will went rigid at Hannibal's touch. He had known what to expect when he'd offered himself to Hannibal, what was going to happen. But he had never done it before, and he was scared. He tried to force himself to relax, to convince the muscles in his shoulders to loosen and the ones in his groin to harden, but nothing he did seemed to help. Hannibal continued to stare unblinkingly at him as his hand slid slowly further down...under his testicles...past his perineum…

Will sobbed when Hannibal's finger reached his entrance and pushed against the tight ring of muscle there, terrified of what was about to happen, what Hannibal would do to him -

But as soon as Will began to cry, Hannibal's hand retreated. And less than a moment later, before Will had time to even realize what was happening, Hannibal was climbing off of him.

"W-what are you doing?" Will sputtered, scrubbing furiously at his eyes. "Come back. We were just getting started-"

"Enough, Will." Hannibal said, so softly, so lovingly, so different from the way he had been looking at him a minute before, that Will almost burst into tears again at the sound. "Enough."

"But why?" Will asked him. "What did I do wrong? I don't understand."

Hannibal shook his head. "You didn't do anything wrong. Haven't I told you already what the thought of someone, *anyone* , forcing themselves on you does to me?" He asked. "How could I do the same?"

"You're not forcing me!" Will tried to tell him. "I want to!"

"...No, you don't." Hannibal told him in that same gentle tone. "I know you don't, Will. It's alright - you don't need to sell yourself to make me stay."

As he was speaking, Hannibal had retrieved the key from his pocket and handed it to Will.

“I want you to get dressed.” He said softly.

“Why?”

“Because I’m taking you downstairs for a drink.” Hannibal told him, bending forward so he could kiss Will’s tear-stained cheeks. “Don’t worry, mylimasis. I won’t leave you. Not when you’re this upset.”

_____

There were only a handful of people at St. Regis’ bar when Will and Hannibal arrived, but the bartender looked ready to burst into tears at just the sight of them.

“Hi! Sit anywhere you like!” She called out from behind the counter in an overly-cheery way. “I’ll be with you in just a minute!”

His expression didn’t change in the slightest, but Will felt a faint flicker of annoyance from Hannibal as he turned to a table by the door. He pulled Will’s seat out for him, and Will collapsed miserably into it, avoiding his eyes.

“Really, Will.” Hannibal said as he slid gracefully into his own chair. “No need to sulk.”

“I’m not sulking.” Will mumbled.

He was, though. How could he not be? He had offered himself to Hannibal and he had been rejected. He had tried to trick Hannibal and he had been caught. He had *cried* , for fuck’s

sake. It was hard not to feel embarrassed, to wish he was as far away from Hannibal as possible.

Preferably somewhere under a rock.

Will risked a quick glance at Hannibal. He was busy studying the wine list. Or at least he was pretending to - Will could tell he was watching him from the corners of his eyes.

Hannibal hadn't said anything yet about what had happened upstairs, but Will knew he would - he was just waiting for the right moment to bring it up.

So Will turned away from him, refusing to give him an opening. Instead, he looked over at the bar, at the girl behind the bar, and watched her for a bit.

She was very young. Way too young, it seemed, to be managing the bar alone, despite the fact that it was nearly empty. She was flitting around behind the counter in an anxious, harried kind of way that guaranteed mistakes had been made, were being made, and would continue to be made until closing. Will blinked, exhausted from the day and just from watching her, and he felt the pendulum in his mind begin to swing before he could stop it.

Just old enough to drink. Just old enough to serve. She had needed a job to help her with school and her uncle had connections. He had gotten her this job (it's not about the grades you make, what matters is the hands you shake), and she felt she couldn't refuse, despite the fact that she didn't want it. She didn't know anything about mixing drinks and she knew even less about the kind of money that was buying them. She was constantly screwing things up, getting orders and ratios wrong and easily flustered by rich snobs who were used to getting their way and old perverts who got bolder with every drink they had. She hated the job but she was terrified of losing it because she needed it and she was always worried she was going to lose it at any second -

Will closed his eyes. He had enough of his own problems without borrowing hers.

He risked another glance at Hannibal. He was watching him openly now.

“What?” He asked grumpily.

“Nothing.” Hannibal told him. “I’m just wondering why you’re so angry.”

“I’m not angry.”

“Really?” Hannibal said with a small smirk. He tilted his head slightly. “Are you sure?”

“Look, I don’t want to talk about it.” Will snapped. “Can we just order our drinks?”

“Very well.” Hannibal said with a sigh before turning his attention to the bar. “I believe the young lady has forgotten us.”

“She’s just overwhelmed.” Will muttered. “She’s not being rude.”

“I didn’t say she was.” Hannibal assured him, though he looked doubtfully around the bar as he stood up. “What would you like?”

“Just a whiskey.”

“Neat? On the rocks?”

“Surprise me.”

Hannibal’s face was strangely blank as he moved away. “Will do.” He promised.

He watched as Hannibal approached the counter, where the bartender was busy refilling another customer's Pilsner. As she was handing it back, Hannibal leaned forward to speak with her. She turned to him with wide eyes, nodding vigorously at whatever he was saying, so that a few strands of hair came loose from her bun. Beside Hannibal, the man she had been helping was clearly listening to the exchange, and after a few moments, he swiveled around in his seat to look at Will, who glared back.

He was an older man. Older than Hannibal, older than Jack, with thinning hair and a truly impressive paunch that was barely hidden beneath his shabby trench coat. He seemed comically out of place amidst the smoking jackets and the pearls, the grandeur and elegance of the St. Regis. He studied Will for a bit longer and then he turned abruptly to Hannibal, tapping him on the arm. Hannibal glanced over at him with barely concealed irritation, and when the man gestured at Will, Hannibal seemed surprised. He glanced over at Will. Said something to the stranger that Will couldn't make out. Back and forth until the bartender returned with Hannibal's drinks, and it was only then that Hannibal finally turned away, a glass in each hand. He seemed slightly unsettled when he sat back down in front of Will.

"Who was that?"

Hannibal blinked at Will, and after a brief pause, he confessed, "I don't know. He didn't introduce himself."

"Well, what did he want?" Will pressed, a bit impatiently.

Hannibal's lip curled in disgust. "It doesn't matter."

"Yes, it does!" Will snapped. "Tell me!"

Hannibal inhaled a long deep breath and then slowly let it out. "He wanted to know how much you...cost."

"How much I...what?"

“He seems to be under the impression,” Hannibal said through his teeth. “That you are an *escort* .”

Will felt himself go red.

“Wha-why would he think that?” Will sputtered, looking back at the bar. The man was still looking at him.

“Most likely because you are very attractive, significantly younger than I am, and are dressed a bit nicer than would be expected for simply getting drinks.” Hannibal mused irritably.

“I’m only wearing what you told me to-”

“I think we should go back to the room.” Hannibal interjected suddenly.

“What? Why?”

“Because I don’t like the way he’s looking at you, Will.”

“What are you talking about? He’s not looking at me any way, he’s just looking at me.”

“Regardless.” Hannibal said primly. “It’s not polite to stare.”

Will felt his stomach drop.

“It’s fine.” He said quickly. “I’m not offended.”

“I am.” Hannibal growled.

“Don’t be.” Will begged him. “Please just...forget about him. Let’s just have a few drinks and try to enjoy ourselves.”

“Of course, Will.” Hannibal agreed. There was still a faint ripple of displeasure in the way he said it. “Would you like to try a sip of my Chianti?”

“No thanks.” Will told him, taking a quick swallow of his whiskey to try and calm his nerves. Several minutes of awkward silence passed between them (at least it felt awkward to Will - Hannibal didn’t seem particularly bothered by it) before Will couldn’t take it anymore. “What are we gonna do now?”

“‘Do’, Will?”

“About your ID.” Will quickly clarified. “We still need to get you one, and if we can’t afford Yuri’s, what are we supposed to do?”

“I’m sure I’ll figure something out.”

“No, we need a plan.” Will insisted. “We need to figure out what we’re going to do next.”

“It’s going to take me some time to find someone who can do what Yuri can do.” Hannibal explained calmly. “And do it as well as he can too.”

“We don’t have time! We should have been out of the country weeks ago!”

“If you’re so concerned about it,” Hannibal said innocently, “I can always try to...renegotiate with Yuri-”

“ *No* , Hannibal.”

“Very well. I’m just reminding you that it’s an option.”

“God, I can’t keep having this conversation with you! No, it’s not an option! The idea is to *not* draw attention to ourselves while we’re here!”

“And I won’t.”

“Please.” Will scoffed. “I know you. And I know you couldn’t resist creating a tableaux if our lives depended on it.”

Hannibal’s dark eyes glittered in the dim light. “You don’t believe me?”

“Of course not.”

Hannibal sighed. “How am I supposed to convince you to trust me,” He said softly, “if you won’t let me prove you can?”

“You don’t have to murder someone to prove I can trust you, Hannibal.” Will snapped. “If fact, why don’t you prove to me I can trust you by *not* murdering anybody?”

Hannibal heaved another sigh, as if what Will was asking was completely unreasonable.

“Why are you so reluctant to embrace who you are?” He murmured.

“This isn’t who I am.” Will hissed. “I don’t enjoy it like you do.”

“Didn’t you tell me once that doing bad things to bad people felt good? And isn’t Yuri the worst kind of bad person?”

“This is different. Jack-”

“ *Enough* about Jack, Will. As I recall, it was *you* who insisted we kill Bedelia. Despite knowing the risk of attracting Jack’s attention.”

“And I made sure there was nothing left! There was nothing that could be used to link us to her-”

“Except the obvious.” Hannibal pointed out. “I doubt there were many people who wanted to do her harm.”

“That’s not-”

“And how many others were there before Bedelia?” Hannibal continued. “Garret Jacob Hobbs. Randall Tier. Francis Dolarhyde. You enjoyed killing them. Didn’t you? Or were they different?”

“No-”

“We’re going in circles, Will.” Hannibal informed him. “We keep having this conversation. And every time we do, I think we’ve made progress. But it seems to me you’re still stuck exactly where you started.”

“I am not stuck where I started.” Will told him. “I’m not the same person I was when we first met.”

“No, you are not.” Hannibal agreed. “You are much more of who you always were - you’re no longer terrified of yourself and what you’re capable of. But you still haven’t embraced

your true nature completely, Will. You're still holding back. I just can't figure out why."

"Because I don't need to kill every person who wrongs me like you do." Will said, his voice low.

Hannibal's lip curled slowly. "Just Bedelia, it would seem."

"I don't want to talk about Bedelia."

"Fine. What would you like to talk about, then, Will?" Hannibal asked. "The others you've killed? Those you would kill?"

"I don't want to talk about any of this at all!" Will snapped. Hannibal considered him.

"Perhaps you still need more of my help than I realized."

"No!" Hazy memories - needles in his arms, tubes in his throat, flashing lights, muscles seizing - memories of the last time Hannibal 'helped' him, came bubbling to the surface. "I don't need your help! I don't ever want your help again!"

"Are you sure, Will?" Hannibal asked him. "How many times have you told me goodbye? And how many times have you come back to me? You must feel you need me or want me for some reason."

Will exhaled long and slow.

"You drugged me. Hypnotized me. Gaslit me. You encouraged codependency. Did God-only-knows-what kind of damage to my brain. Who knows if I'm even capable of making my own decisions anymore." Will muttered.

“Feeling powerless, Will? Perhaps you should talk to Yuri about that.”

Will gave him a look, and Hannibal tilted his head. “I admit I’ve manipulated you before. Influenced you in ways I’m not even sure you realize. But everything you’ve done since you helped me escape has been your own choice, Will. You can’t deny that.”

Will stared at him, lips slightly parted, ready to deny it but knowing he couldn’t. He faltered, and Hannibal leaned closer, sensing his weakness, his doubt.

“When are you going to realize that it’s not me you’re fighting but yourself, Will? When are you finally going to understand that everything I’ve done has been to help you?” He reached out and gently took Will’s hand. “What am I going to have to do to make you see that?”

Will couldn’t even begin to imagine the kinds of things Hannibal could do to manipulate him now, but just knowing that he could, knowing what he was capable of, was terrifying. He shuddered slightly, and that’s when Hannibal went for the kill. He brought face to Will’s, their lips were just inches apart...

But before he could come any closer, a loud, shrill ringtone made Will jump, and Hannibal pulled abruptly away, muttering something under his breath.

“I apologize, Will. I thought I silenced it.” He said as he pulled his phone from his pocket. He checked the screen with a frown. “Please excuse me.” He said, rising to his feet. “I don’t think Chiyoh would be calling me unless she had good reason to.”

Will said nothing as Hannibal lifted the phone to his ear and quickly ducked outside the bar. It was only once he had left that he took another quick swallow of his drink, trying to calm himself down. And when that didn’t work, he had another.

“This seat taken?”

Will jerked around with a snarl.

“Whoa, whoa, easy! Jesus, kid...relax.”

It was the old man from the bar. The one who thought he was a prostitute. Will glared at him as he sank into Hannibal’s empty chair with a groan. He settled himself like he had all the time in the world, clasping his hands over the table and tapping his thumbs together as he studied Will. His gaze lingered on Will’s neck, at the bruises that were beginning to bloom across his throat. Will resisted the urge to cover them.

“Can I help you?” Will snapped. The man shrugged.

“Buy ya a drink, kid?” He asked. “You look like you could use it.”

“I think I’m good.”

“I’ll bet you are...you got a name?”

“John.”

The man chuckled dryly. “Yeah, yeah. Sure it is.” He said. “I’m Mick, by the way. Just in case you were wondering.”

“I wasn’t.”

“You doin’ alright, John?”

“Doing just fine, thanks.”

“You sure? ‘Cause if you ask me, kid, you look like you might be in way over your head.”

“Well, I didn’t ask you.”

“Mouthy little thing, ain’t cha...People like that, or does it get’cha in trouble?” Mick asked, looking pointedly at Will’s neck.

“Look, I’m not a whore. So if that’s what you’re after, then I suggest you keep moving.”

“Hmm. No offense, kid, but I’ve been in this business a long time. I think I know it when I see it.”

Will looked him doubtfully up and down. “ *You* ?”

“Technically, I’m retired now.” Mick told him, reaching into his coat pocket. He took out a small white business card and set it on the table between them. “But I still keep tabs where I can.”

“What’s that?” Will asked Mick as he slowly heaved himself to his feet.

“That’s for you, kid. You ever decide you’ve had enough of him,” He nodded toward the door. “Just give me a call. Trust me, I’ll make sure you’re taken care of.”

He left without another word. Will watched him go, and once he was sure he was gone he snatched the card up and turned it over. The only thing written on it was a phone number.

“Creep.” Will muttered, crumpling the card up and tossing it aside. He finished his drink and glanced nervously back at the doors. Chiyoh was usually pretty direct. Even if Hannibal wasn’t, he would have thought he’d be back by now. Was there something wrong? Had Jack found their New Orleans hideout? Will felt his pulse quicken. He bet that was it. Jack had

somehow found them and Chiyoh had had to flee the house. What if she was calling to warn them?

Or worse - what if Jack had surprised Chiyoh? What if he had cut her a deal of some kind? Get Hannibal on the phone and keep him talking long enough to trace the call and he'd let her go? Oh, God. Will looked back at the door again. He couldn't see where Hannibal had disappeared to. Where was he? What was going on?

Will nearly jumped out of his seat when the bartender suddenly appeared at his elbow.

"Here ya go, hon!" She said brightly, setting a glass in front of him. Whether she was oblivious to his cursing or just choosing to ignore it wasn't clear. "Scotch on the rocks with a twist. Enjoy!"

"Wait, I didn't order that." Will quickly informed her, pushing the glass back across the table. She frowned, and quickly pulled a laminated card out of her apron, consulting it. Her shirt was rumpled, her eye makeup had smeared, and most of her hair had come undone, making her look even more frazzled than her fixed smile and panicked expression.

"Table 8." She muttered to herself. "No, that's right."

"No, it's not." Will insisted. "I'm sorry, but not paying for that."

"Oh, don't worry. You don't have to - someone bought it for you." She reassured him, wringing her hands nervously.

"What? Who?"

"Umm." She looked first one way and then the other. "He was just here…huh, he must have left."

“Wha-”

There was the sudden loud and distinct sound of glass shattering from across the bar, and with a small whimper, the bartender went scurrying away before Will could ask her to describe the buyer for him. Muttering to himself, Will stole a swig of Hannibal’s Chianti and then another. By the time Hannibal finally returned, he was starting to feel tipsy.

“Everything okay?” Will asked him as he sat back down.

Hannibal blinked at him. “Yes, everything’s fine.” He seemed distracted. “What’s that?”

He nodded at the glass sitting innocently between them on the table.

“I don’t know. She said it was scotch.”

“You don’t know?” Hannibal echoed, looking at him sharply. “You didn’t order it?”

“No, someone bought it for me.”

Hannibal’s eyes narrowed. “Who?”

“Dunno.” Will said with a shrug. “Apparently he left.”

“Don’t you dare drink that.”

Will bristled. “I wasn’t going to.”

“Then why is it still here?”

“I tried sending it back, but the girl got busy-”

“It doesn’t matter if she was busy. That’s her job.”

“I’m not gonna drink it so what does it - hey, give that back! What are you doing?”

“I’m going to get her to take it back.”

“Hannibal, don’t. Leave the poor girl alone.”

“I don’t want it here!” Hannibal hissed. “I want it gone!”

Will snatched the drink from him and downed it in one gulp. When he set the glass back down, he found Hannibal glaring at him. Will scowled back.

“There. Better?”

“No.” Hannibal spat furiously. “Throw it up. Now.”

“Make me.”

“Don’t tempt me, Will. I brought my Gladstone bag with me - I have more than enough Ipecac to make that happen.”

“You have your...why did you bring your bag?”

“Because I find it’s best to be prepared.” Hannibal answered coolly. “Case and point. Now come with me.”

“No. I’m fine.”

“You don’t know that.” Hannibal said, rising to his feet. “I mean it, Will. Come on.”

“You’re being ridiculous.” Will snapped as Hannibal pulled him to his feet. “I feel fi-oh.”

A wave of dizziness hit Will the moment he was upright.

“Will?” Hannibal asked as Will sagged against him. “Will? Are you alright? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” Will mumbled. “Nothing, I just got a little dizzy is all.”

“You’re dizzy?”

“I’m okay.” Will breathed. “I’m fine.”

He wasn’t. The room was beginning to tilt. His mouth was dry. He felt uncomfortably warm. Will closed his eyes and forced himself to breathe slowly and deeply, but it didn’t really help.

“You’re very pale.” Hannibal told him. He seemed worried. “Come on. We need to get you back to the room.”

“Yeah...yeah, okay.”

Will kept a firm hold of the table as he shuffled his way to the door, Hannibal hovering close behind, ready to catch him if he fell, but he managed the short distance to the door on his own. He only made it about halfway down the hall when he suddenly stumbled.

"Will? Will, come on. We can't stop here. Come on."

Hannibal pulled one of Will's arms over his shoulders and looped a strong arm around his waist. dragging him onto the elevator. "Stay with me, Will."

Stay with me.

Where else would I go?

It was getting harder to focus on what was happening. His head was spinning, his thoughts slipping from his grasp like minnows. Will panted. He felt hot. Like he was either going to throw up or pass out. "I don't feel good." He whimpered.

"I know." Hannibal reassured him with a quick kiss to his temple. "I know. It's alright, Will. I'll take care of you. You'll be alright."

The sudden jolt of the elevator moving took whatever was left of Will's balance and threw it out the window. He groaned as the ground rocked beneath his feet like a ship on the sea, and he clawed desperately at Hannibal, trying to keep himself upright.

"Will?"

"Don't let me go." Will begged him breathlessly. "Just don't let me go."

“I won’t let you go, Will.” Hannibal promised him as the elevator doors sprang open. “It’s okay. You’ll be fine.”

Will’s vision was swimming. There was a faint roaring in his ears. His legs finally gave out just a few feet from their door. When Hannibal lifted him into his arms, the world spun like a kaleidoscope. Will sobbed.

“It’s alright, Will. We’re back in the room. Everything’s alright -”

He didn’t know what was happening. Everything was a blur, a rush of sounds and shapes and colors all bleeding into each other. His thoughts were unraveling. He felt like he was coming undone, like he was losing his mind. The only thing that felt real were Hannibal’s arms under his shoulders and knees. The only thing he could see clearly were the shadows dancing in the corners of his vision, following them, singing to him.

‘ *There’s nothing that goes faster,*

Than each new passing year.

It’s gonna get’cha one day,

So enjoy it while you’re here. ’

Her voice was sweet. Like bells. There was something about it that reminded him of a music box. The kind with the ballerina spinning endlessly round and round and round the way Will was now…

And then he was falling.

“Hannibal!” He cried, scrabbling frantically for something to grab, to hold onto, to break the slow fall down to earth. “ *Hannibal* !”

“I’m right here, Will. It’s alright. I’m just putting you on the bed.”

‘ *Enjoy yourself, enjoy yourself,*

You only get one shot… ’

When Will’s flailing fingers brushed against something soft, and he clamped down on it as if his life depended on it. From somewhere in the smear of color above him, he heard Hannibal grunt.

“Will. Will, let go...sweetheart, let go.”

“No, please!” Will begged him when he pulled away. “Don’t leave me!”

“I’m not going to leave you, Will.” Hannibal promised him. A whisper of noise, barely there. “Not now. Not ever. Do you understand?”

Do you understand…do you understand….do you understand?

Caught in a loop, an endless echo. Do you understand…What? What did he understand? He couldn’t remember. The harder he tried, the less he could. What was happening? Where was Hannibal? He wanted Hannibal, he needed Hannibal. Where had he gone? Didn’t he know Will needed him? That he didn’t know who he was without him? That he couldn’t live without him?

‘ *Enjoy it while you have it, ‘cause*

‘You don’t know what you've got…’

Will wept with relief when he felt Hannibal’s hand, hot as a brand, press against his forehead. “You’re burning up.”

No, no, no!” Will sobbed. “Don’t let me burn! Please, please don’t let me burn! Not again!”

“You’re not going to burn, Will.” Hannibal said softly. He sounded far away. “I won’t let you.”

It didn’t matter. Bad as he was shaking, hard as his heart was beating, he’d break apart before he had the chance to burn up. Tear right along the seams, his heart bursting in his chest. He whimpered.

“I’m dying.”

“You’re not dying. Easy, easy -!”

Something twisted painfully inside him, inverted on itself. Fire up his throat, spilling from his nose and mouth, salt pouring from his eyes and down his face. Will choked, sobbed, closed his eyes as he was suddenly heaved upward.

“Breathe, Will!”

Air. Cold air across his skin and in his mouth. Warm hands on his chest and back, massaging, pounding, forcing his exhausted lungs to keep working. It may have been a moment or an eternity before Will was slowly lifted back down.

“Will. Will, open your eyes. Come on, open your eyes for me.”

When he did, it wasn’t Hannibal who was leaning over him like he expected.

It was her.

Porcelain skin. Big blue eyes. Thick dark waves spilling down over her white dress. Humming quietly. She smiled down at him, too wide, and Will jerked away from her when she reached for him.

“No!”

“Will?”

“No! No! No! Hannibal! Hannibal, please! Help me!”

“Will, what is it? What’s wrong?”

“Don’t let her hurt me, please!”

“What? Who, Will?”

‘Enjoy yourself. Enjoy yourself.

It goes quicker than you think…’

“Oh, God!” Will moaned, cringing away from her as she began to sing, trying to curl protectively around himself.

“Will! Will, listen to me - whatever you think you see, it’s not real-”

“ *So enjoy it while it lasts,*

‘Because it’s over in a blink.’

“Will, can you hear me? Will-”

‘ *Enjoy yourself, there’s nothing*

Certain ‘bout the dawn…’

“Will! Stay awake!”

‘ *Enjoy yourself…*

Enjoy yourself…’

“Will!”

‘Cause you’re...

...Already...

...Gone…’

These Eyes Sitting on the Wall, They Watch Every Move I Make

Chapter Summary

Aftermath of a bad trip.

Chapter Notes

Warning! Discussions of non-con drugging and assault/rape as well as non-graphic descriptions of vomiting.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Awareness came slowly. In pieces. At first, there was only darkness. Will hung suspended, cradled in the vast and absolute void that surrounded him, and for the first time in a long time, nothing hurt. He didn't know how long he hovered between the waking world and sleep, but when reality finally began to bleed into his senses again, he was almost disappointed.

It was soft beneath him. Warm around him. It took him a while to realize he was lying on a bed, the sheets wrapped uncomfortably around him. They were starchy, unfamiliar, and scratched against his over raw skin. He didn't like them. He tried to shift a little, just to loosen them a bit, but found he couldn't move - his limbs were too heavy, the sheets were too tight. He was stuck. His heart stuttered fearfully and he whimpered. The sound dragged up his dry and aching throat. His mouth tasted disgusting. Eventually, Will managed to open his eyes.

Someone had pulled the curtains together, and the morning light was filtering through the gap, filling the room with a soft, yellow glow. Will blinked, his head pounding, and watched the dust motes as they whirled in the sunbeams for a few moments before he turned his attention back to himself.

He was lying on his side, swaddled in blankets. There were towels packed underneath him, and pillows stacked behind him to prevent him from rolling over, off the bed, in his sleep. He wasn't sure if he blushed because he had been tucked into bed like a child or because someone had removed his clothes. He tried to move again and this time he found he could. Just enough to get comfortable. He was far too tired to try and move any more, to do much else than lie there, and for a while he lay drifting in and out of sleep, trying to remember how he had gotten there, what had happened…

And then it came rushing back to him.

Will gasped, struggling to sit up.

"Hannibal?" He called out. His voice was scratchy and strained. Like he had been screaming all night.

There was no answer. There was only silence. Silence so loud it echoed. Will twisted in the sheets, trying to loosen them, and rolled over.

He jerked in surprise when he saw what was waiting for him on the other side.

Perched on the chair that had been dragged to his bedside, watching him, was Beverly.

"Bev?" He croaked hesitantly. There was something about her expression, the way her mouth was set in a grim line, that scared him. "Is something wrong?"

She glared at him.

"Where's Hannibal, Will?" She was all she said. He blinked.

"What?"

“Where is he?”

Will opened his mouth. Closed it again. Looked around the empty room. Felt the silence as it pressed against him. Will frowned at her. Wherever Hannibal was, he wasn’t there, that much was obvious.

“I don’t know.” He said.

“Where’s Hannibal?”

“I don’t know.” He repeated. He felt a faint flutter of fear. “What’s happening?”

“I think you know.”

“No, I don’t.” Will insisted, trying to sit up again and failing miserably. “Just tell me what’s going on!”

She just looked at him. Because she couldn’t answer. Because she didn’t know. How could she? After all, as she had once said before, she was him and he was her. She didn’t know, and neither did Will. Not really. But…

There was something there. Just below the surface. Something that was scratching, trying to get his attention, demanding it.

Look. It seemed to be saying. *It’s right there in front of you. All of it. All you have to do is look ...*

But before Will could ponder it too closely, what it meant, he heard the distant sound of a key card slipping quickly in and out of its lock, and then a heavy door swinging shut. Beverly

turned her head slightly as footsteps began to echo down the hall, closer and closer, louder and louder, before they came to a sudden stop outside the bedroom door. Together they watched the door handle as it slowly turned…

Hannibal slipped quietly inside the room, an ice bucket in his arms. He froze when he looked up and saw Will staring back at him.

“Will?” Hannibal called softly as he came forward. He was moving very slowly, deliberately, as though he were trying not to startle him. “Are you with me?”

Will glanced over at the chair and saw that Beverly had vanished. He nodded. “More or less.”

Hannibal sighed and set the ice bucket on the nightstand, sinking down onto the bed beside Will. He studied him for a moment, and Will squirmed uncomfortably under his gaze. Then, slowly, Hannibal reached out and cupped Will’s cheek in his hand.

“I was worried about you.” He confessed, his thumb stroking back and forth across Will’s cheek.

“What happened?” Will croaked.

Hannibal cocked his head. “You don’t remember?” He seemed surprised.

“Not...not all of it.” Will admitted, his dry tongue darting out to lick uselessly at his chapped lips. Hannibal turned and fished an ice chip out from the bucket. “I remember going down to the bar.” Will said, watching him. “I remember...everything before that. And most of what happened while we were there, I think. But I don’t really know what happened after we left.”

Hannibal nodded, as if he expected this, and offered Will a sliver of ice. With shaking hands, Will took it from him, pressing it to his mouth as Hannibal began to talk.

“I got you back up to the room.” He told him. “But barely - I had to carry you inside.”

Bits and pieces were trickling back - small bursts of clarity amidst a jumbled, nonsensical mess of color and sound. Hannibal’s arms around him. A litany of reassurances. The woman from his nightmare, grinning maniacally over him. Her...lullaby. Will shuddered at the thought, and Hannibal slipped his hand in Will’s, squeezing it.

“You scared me.” He confessed quietly. “You were completely out of it - talking about things that weren’t there, crying for me, begging me to help you.” Will blushed and looked away. He wished he could say he didn’t remember that part. “You passed out eventually. Not long after you threw up.”

Well, that explained his sore throat and the awful aftertaste in his mouth, at least. “What happened to my clothes?”

“I took them off. Between the vomit and the sweat, I thought you would be more comfortable without them.”

Will looked at him suspiciously. “I would have been much more comfortable if I woke up in my boxers, Hannibal.” He said pointedly.

“I didn’t take advantage of you.” Hannibal was quick to reassure him. But there was still something about his tone Will didn’t like. “You had...an accident during the night. I thought if you had another one, it would be easier to clean up if I left you bare.”

Aaannnddd that explained the towels. Will buried his face in his hands with a groan, blushing furiously. Hannibal patted him on the shoulder, and if Will wasn’t so busy being absolutely mortified, he might have found the awkward little gesture funny, even endearing.

“It happens.” Hannibal told him.

“No, it does *not* .” Will’s voice was muffled under his hands. “People don’t just piss themselves!”

“There’s no need to feel embarrassed. It wasn’t your fault - you were drugged, Will.” Hannibal reminded him.

“Like that makes me feel better.”

Hannibal chuckled from somewhere above him.

“And then what?” Will asked through his fingers, more than a little afraid to know. “After I passed out and everything, what happened then?”

“Not much. You slept the rest of the night.”

“...That’s it?” Will demanded, peeking at him doubtfully. “Nothing else happened?”

Hannibal shrugged. “You were talking and crying a bit in your sleep, but that was all.”

“What was I saying?”

Hannibal hesitated.

“Hannibal, what was I saying?” Will pushed him, a heavy ball of dread beginning to build in his stomach.

“Nothing bad. Mostly things like ‘help’ and ‘please’. You asked for me a few times.” He paused again. “You were also talking to your mother.”

The dread grew. “What?” He asked, horrified. “What did I say?”

For a moment, Will didn’t think Hannibal was going to answer him.

“Hannibal, tell me!”

Hannibal swallowed thickly. “...You kept saying ‘Please don’t hurt me, mama.’” He said slowly.

Will couldn’t ever remember his face feeling as hot as it did then, and a minute ago Hannibal had told him he’d wet the bed. He looked away, unable to face Hannibal and the questions that he knew were coming.

“Will.” Hannibal said gently. “You told me you didn’t know your mother.”

“I didn’t.” Will assured him shortly. “She left when I was two.”

“Then what did you mean? What were you talking about?”

“I was high, Hannibal! Who knows what the hell I was saying!”

Hannibal fell silent. Though it was obvious he didn’t believe Will, he didn’t push him, and for that at least, Will was grateful.

He sighed, eager to change the subject. “God, I can't believe I was roofied.” He mumbled, swallowing down the little sliver of ice Hannibal had given him.

“I don’t think you were.” Hannibal told him. “The way you reacted...I don’t believe you were given rohypnol.”

“What was it then, do you think?”

“If I had to guess,” Hannibal said. “I would say it was LSD.”

Will stared at him. “You think someone slipped me acid?”

“Or a cocktail of drugs laced with it.”

“But why?” Will demanded. “That doesn’t make any sense - why would you use hallucinogens if you wanted to rape someone?”

“Perhaps rape was not their intention.” Hannibal murmured, so quietly Will almost didn’t hear him.

“Then what was?”

“I have no idea.” Hannibal said, shaking his head with a frown. “And I doubt we’ll ever know.”

Will considered this. “That man at the bar.” He confessed hesitantly. “The one who thought I was a hooker - Mick - he came to our table. After you left.”

Hannibal’s head whipped around so quickly that Will was shocked it didn’t snap his neck. “What?” He asked sharply. “You didn’t tell me that.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I forgot. Something came up.” Will said sarcastically.

“What did he say to you?” Hannibal demanded. Will shrugged, trying to remember.

“He asked if he could buy me a drink and I said no. Something about looking like I was in over my head. Then he told me that if I ever got tired of you, I should give him a call.”

“He gave you his number?”

“Yeah, but I threw it away.”

Hannibal was quiet for a moment. “You realize,” he eventually said. “That he was probably the one who drugged you, don’t you?”

“Really? It never occurred to me.”

Hannibal didn’t seem to hear him. That, or he was ignoring him.

“I wish you would have kept his card.” He muttered darkly. “I would *love* to have it right now....”

“Well, I didn’t.” Will said, eyeing him uneasily. “And it’s not like either of us can do anything to change that.”

“I know. I’m just sorry this happened to you.”

He heaved another sigh and looked at Will.

And Will saw him. Really, truly saw him, what he was feeling, for the first time since they met. His regret that Will had been hurt, his worry. His anger for what had happened. His frustration at himself for not being able to protect Will.

His love for him.

It was all right there in the open, laid bare for Will to see.

It was so much more than he ever expected.

Will dropped his head back onto the pillows and screwed his eyes firmly shut so that he wouldn't have to see any more.

"I'm sorry." He choked out, his mouth twisting painfully in an effort to keep the tears from falling. "I'm sorry!"

"For what, Will?" Hannibal asked calmly, running his fingers through Will's hair.

"F-for everything." Will hiccuped. "Last night. Yuri. Kissing you. The bar. All of it." He swallowed thickly, and felt a few hot tears escape down his cheeks. "I'm so sorry."

"You have nothing to apologize for, Will." Hannibal told him as he continued to thread his fingers through his hair. "I understand yesterday was extremely difficult for you. You were upset about Yuri. You were scared that we were going to lose everything. You were angry at me. Of course you lashed out when you could - it was the only thing you felt you could control."

"It doesn't matter. I still shouldn't have done it."

"It's alright, Will." Hannibal hummed. "I forgive you."

Will sniffed, blinking heavily up at him. The rhythmic motion of Hannibal's hand moving back and forth through his hair was making him sleepy.

"What time is it?" He mumbled, rubbing at his aching eyes.

Hannibal checked his watch. "Quarter to ten."

"When's checkout?"

"Eleven." Hannibal's fingers gently pulled a tangled curl apart. "Would you like me to ask for a late checkout? Or book us another night?"

"No." Will said firmly, forcing himself to sit up. As exhausted as he was, and as much as he wanted nothing more than to drift back off to sleep, he knew he needed to get Hannibal out of Atlanta as fast as possible. Yuri was still out there, and now that Hannibal knew Will was okay, there was nothing he could do to stop him from going after the Russian. "No. I want to leave."

"Will. You shouldn't push yourself." Hannibal scolded him, grabbing Will's shoulders and forcing him to lie back down. "Why don't you sleep for a little bit longer, and when you wake up we'll see how you're feeling -"

"No!" Will said stubbornly, squirming weakly against Hannibal's iron hold. "Please, Hannibal! I don't want to be here, I wanna go home!-"

Hannibal's grip tightened, and his eyes widened. He stared down at Will with wonder. "What did you say?" He breathed, as if he couldn't believe what he had just heard.

Will looked at him. He knew what Hannibal wanted - he wanted Will. But even more than that, he wanted Will to want him back. To want a life with Hannibal in it. A life together.

It terrified Will - not only what Hannibal wanted and how badly he wanted it, but also the fact that there might come a day when he wanted it too. It terrified him, what that meant. So he had avoided talking about the details of their future, his feelings. Until now, he had refused to call the little cottage home.

Because as far as Will was concerned, it wasn't. He had learned since childhood not to get too attached to brick and mortar, and he was perfectly aware that the house was just a stepping stone, a stopping place, a halfway point to something much more permanent. No, he didn't think of it as home.

But Hannibal didn't need to know that.

"I said," Will mumbled, looking up at Hannibal imploringly. "I said I wanna go home. Please."

Hannibal released the breath he had been holding when he heard those words. Sighing blissfully, he leaned down and kissed Will on his forehead.

"Of course." He said tenderly. "Of course, sweetheart, I'll take you home. Shh, it's alright, Will, don't worry. I'll take care of everything."

Will breathed a small sigh of relief and allowed Hannibal to pepper his face with worshipful kisses.

It worked. It had actually worked - he had managed to convince Hannibal to take them back without leaving a bloodbath in their wake. It really worked. They were getting out. They were safe. No one had recognized them. Jack had no reason to suspect they were alive and well in Atlanta, that they were heading to New Orleans. They could slip quietly away without having to worry about looking too closely over their shoulders. They had bought themselves one more day. More time. Another chance. It had all worked out. Everything was fine.

And yet...

He glanced over at the empty chair Beverly had been sitting in, drawn to it like a moth to a flame, hell-bent on self-destruction.

‘Where’s Hannibal, Will?’

Why couldn’t he shake the feeling that something was wrong?

_____

Will insisted on taking a shower before they left, and Hannibal insisted on supervising him while he was having it. Will refused, reminding Hannibal that he’d had to help clean him up the night before and no way in hell was he going to let that happen again. Hannibal then pointed out that he was a doctor, that he had seen Will naked before, that whatever drugs he had been given were still likely in his system, and that he was putting himself at risk for a serious head injury if he insisted on showering alone. Will countered that Hannibal had already given him several serious head injuries over the years and some people (Hannibal. Only Hannibal and literally no one else) would argue that he had turned out just fine in spite of them, maybe even better than fine because of them. Hannibal bristled, and Will snarled. In the end, they settled on a compromise - Hannibal agreed to let Will shower by himself and Will agreed to leave the bathroom door cracked open in case he needed help.

He was only in the shower for a minute when his legs started trembling so bad he had to sit down in the tub, shivering under the icy spray. No matter which way he twisted the knobs, he couldn’t seem to get warm.

He stayed only enough to wash the dried sweat away.

When he finally climbed out, lightheaded and panting only a few minutes after stepping inside, he knew Hannibal had been right, but he’d be damned if he ever admitted it out loud. Instead, he sank slowly down to the bathroom floor and pressed his forehead to the icy tile, listening to the distant sounds of Hannibal gathering everything together and arranging for

their bags to be taken down to the car. His stomach churned threateningly, and he closed his eyes, forcing himself to take several deep, slow breaths.

’Stay awake.’ He told himself. ‘Stay awake. Don’t pass out, just keep breathing.’

He jumped when he heard a loud knock on the door.

“Will?” Hannibal called out. “Are you alright?”

“Yes.” The room spun. Will could feel bile inching up his throat.

“Are you sure? You’ve been in there a long time-”

“I’m fine! Don’t come in!”

He heard Hannibal heave a long-suffering sigh through the door, but to Will’s relief, he didn’t come in. Several minutes passed before Will was able to sit up and pull on his clothes, and when he finally emerged from the bathroom, he wasn’t surprised to find Hannibal waiting for him just outside the door. Hannibal’s eyes widened when he saw him.

“Are you all right?” He asked, fretfully pushing Will’s wet hair aside and studying his pale face with a frown. “You’re shaking.”

“I’m fine.” Will mumbled. He resisted the urge to drop his forehead against Hannibal’s shoulder, knowing that it wouldn’t reassure him in the slightest. Not that Hannibal seemed particularly convinced he was fine anyway - he kept his arm wrapped firmly around Will’s waist as they made their way downstairs to the front desk, ready to catch him if he stumbled or fell. When they reached the lobby, Will began to squirm.

“Let me go.” He demanded, trying to pry himself free from Hannibal’s grip.

“No, absolutely not.”

“It looks suspicious!” Will hissed at him. “People are gonna notice if you have to hold me up! They’ll remember if someone asks them about it later!”

“Will, you can barely stand-”

“It will literally take you two seconds! I’ll be fine!”

He eventually managed to convince Hannibal to release him, and he did so very unwillingly, glancing back at Will over his shoulder as he stepped up to the counter alone.

It took only a few minutes for Hannibal to get them checked out, but Will was already beginning to sway by the time he turned around. Hannibal was quick to grab him again.

“Ready to go?” He asked, sounding worried, tucking Will against his side. Will nodded, too sick and tired to protest as Hannibal led him away to the door.

Hannibal must have called down to the front desk and arranged to have the car ready, because it was waiting for them when they stepped outside. Will could have wept with relief at the sight of it, and allowed Hannibal to help him into the passenger seat.

“Stop it!” He whined when Hannibal tried to buckle his seat belt for him. “I’m fine! I don’t need your help!”

Hannibal ignored him. Only once he was sure Will was properly secured, the bags were loaded, and the bellhop and valet generously tipped, did Hannibal finally climb into the car beside him.

“Are you sure you want to leave so soon?” He asked. “Why don’t we wait a few minutes and see how you feel?”

“ *No* , Hannibal.”

They didn’t even make it to the end of the street before Will was scrambling for the door handle.

“Pull over!”

As soon as the car came to a stop, Will was tumbling out and retching over the curb. Hannibal was at his side a moment later, rubbing his back and murmuring to him quietly as Will continued to bring up nothing but watery bile.

“Will.”

Will shook his head. He could tell by his tone what Hannibal was about to say. “I’m fine!” He coughed, wiping a string of saliva hanging from his chin. “Really!”

“Why don’t we check back into the hotel?” Hannibal asked him, his voice gentle, coaxing. “You’re clearly in no condition to travel-”

“No!” Will tried to pull away from him, terrified that Hannibal would force him back inside. “No! Please, I wanna go home!”

“All right.” Hannibal soothed, holding him firm. “Shh. It’s all right.” He was quiet for a few minutes, thinking. “I have Scopolamine patches in my bag.” He said eventually. “Would you like one? It might help.”

Will thought about it.

Scopolamine. An anticholinergic agent that reduces bodily secretions. Primarily used to treat nausea and motion sickness. Common side effects include blurred vision, drowsiness, dry mouth, urinary retention and constipation. Overdose may result in fever, confusion, hallucinations, difficulty breathing, and seizures...

He shook his head.

The last thing he wanted was another drug. Especially one whose symptoms were so disturbingly similar to what he had experienced only a few hours earlier. And he really didn't like the idea of being knocked out for the entire drive back, either.

Especially if *that* meant Hannibal would be left to his own devices for over six hours...

Will didn't even realize he was still frantically shaking his head until Hannibal reached out and trapped his face in his hands, stilling him.

"Okay." He murmured, stroking Will's cheeks with his thumbs. "Okay, Will. It's okay."

"No drugs." Will said faintly.

"No drugs." Hannibal agreed. "Let me see..."

The only other thing Hannibal could think of to help the nausea was for Will to lay down on the backseat.

"I thought sitting in the front seat helped motion sickness." Will groaned, climbing miserably into the back of the car.

“Clearly.” Hannibal quipped before he went to retrieve something from the trunk. He reappeared a moment later with the ice bucket from their room.

“Did you steal that?” Will mumbled hazily as Hannibal handed it to him.

“I’ve done worse. Keep that nearby in case you feel sick again.” Hannibal advised him, folding his jacket and wedging it under Will’s head. “How’s that? Any better?”

Will nodded, hoping that Hannibal wouldn’t realize he was lying. Praying he’d still be able to convince him to leave if he did.

But Hannibal just smiled.

“Good.” He said. “Let’s go home.”

———-

The winter sun had long disappeared over the horizon by the time they reached New Orleans, leaving the winding country road to the house shrouded in darkness. Will lay draped across the backseat of the car, gazing out of the window at the stars that shimmered above him. The car rumbled beneath him. Bach played softly on the radio. His back ached, his eyes burned. He shifted slightly, trying to get comfortable.

“We’re almost there, Will.” Hannibal called softly to him. He must have heard him moving around. “Just a few more minutes.”

Will nodded, forgetting that Hannibal couldn’t see him from the front seat. God, he was tired…

…When he saw the lights burning in the distance, he thought he was dreaming.

“Look, Will.” Hannibal said. “Chiyoh’s guiding us home.”

It was so bright - she must have turned on every light in the house. It reminded him of a lighthouse...or a boat on the sea. Will felt something contract painfully inside him at the thought.

Chiyoh was waiting for them on the porch when they arrived, her dark eyes following the car as it pulled up in front of the house. When she saw the empty passenger seat, she frowned.

“Where’s Will?” She asked Hannibal as he stepped out of the car to greet her. He gestured vaguely at the car.

“There was…a bit of an incident.”

“An incident?” She echoed, following Hannibal as he moved to the backseat and opened the door. “What do you mean?”

When she finally saw Will, her eyes widened.

“What happened to him?” She demanded as she moved closer, trying to see him better.

Will knew he had to look bad if Chiyoh was asking that. The fact that he was practically hanging off of Hannibal probably wasn’t helping, either.

“I’ll explain once I get Will inside.” Hannibal told her, throwing one of Will’s arms over his shoulders. “Would you mind helping me with the bags, Chiyoh?”

While Chiyoh unloaded the trunk, Hannibal took Will back to the house, carefully guiding him up the porch steps and into the sitting room. As Hannibal was helping him to the couch, Will caught sight of Chiyoh in the hall, silently stacking their bags in front of the door and draping the garment bags over the banister. There was something about the way she was acting that made Will nervous...

He jumped when Hannibal pressed a hand to his forehead.“How are you feeling?”

“Stop babying me!” Will complained, pushing him away. “I’m fine!”

Hannibal’s lip quirked fondly.

“You are, are you?” He said, sounding amused.

“Yes.” Will grumbled. “Perfectly fine.”

“Oh, perfectly fine!” Hannibal repeated with a smile. “Then that must mean you feel well enough to eat.”

Will’s twisted stomach sank.

“No.”

“You haven’t eaten anything all day, Will.” Hannibal reminded him. “I think you should try.”

“No.” Will begged him.

“Yes.” Hannibal said sternly. “Just a bit.”

He turned as Chiyoh slipped quietly into the room, her eyes locked on Will. From the look on her face, it was obvious that he looked even worse in the light than he had outside in the shadows.

“Have you eaten yet, Chiyoh?”

She shook her head slowly, her eyes still raking up and down Will’s limp form.

“Excellent!” Hannibal said cheerfully, pushing himself to his feet. If he had noticed her troubled expression, he didn’t show it or acknowledge it in any way. “Would you mind keeping an eye on Will for me while I prepare dinner?”

She hesitated for only a moment, and then shook her head again. Not that her answer really mattered - because even though Hannibal phrased it like a question, it was really a command, and they all knew it. He didn’t even wait to see her response - he was halfway across the room before she gave it.

But as Hannibal passed Chiyoh on his way to the kitchen, she took a small step sideways, blocking his path.

“Are you going to tell me what happened?” Will heard her ask him quietly.

“Later.” He promised, slipping past her.

Will eyed her warily as she slowly turned and sank into a chair across the room. She didn’t say anything. She just sat there, watching him. Will squirmed nervously under her piercing gaze.

“What happened to you, Will?” She finally asked him. Her voice was hard, unrelenting. Demanding and expecting an answer.

“Nothing much.” Will mumbled.

“...Really?” She asked, her voice fairly dripping with sarcasm.

“Look, it’s no big deal, okay?” He snapped. “Hannibal and I got drinks last night and someone slipped something in mine. That’s all. I’m fine.”

“Someone slipped something in your drink?” She repeated. “Who?”

“No idea.” Will told her with a shrug. “Some guy at the bar.”

“But you’re not hurt?”

“No. Just feel sick.”

She frowned at him. “And what about Hannibal’s papers?” She asked after a moment. “Did you get them?”

Will hesitated. He wasn’t sure how she’d react if she found out they didn’t have them, if he should be the one to tell her or Hannibal. “No.” He admitted at last.

“What? Why not?”

“The price changed.” Will explained, rubbing his eyes. “At the last second. I…I don’t know what it was, but Hannibal was really angry about it. He refused to pay it.”

She considered this. “And did Hannibal… *do* something about it?”

“He wanted to.” Will said. “But he didn’t get a chance.”

“What do you mean?” She asked him sharply. “Why not?”

“Because I was drugged before he had the chance.”

Will wished she wasn’t so good at masking her feelings. It was impossible to tell what she was thinking, even for him. “I see. And when did this all happen?”

“Yesterday.” Will told her, wondering why it mattered. “We met Yuri at…I don’t know, four thirty? It was going to take him a couple hours to get everything ready, so while we were waiting, we went out to dinner. We went back to pick up the documents at about seven.”

“And that’s when he changed the price?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you know what he was asking for originally?” When Will shook his head, she continued, “And the new price? You said you don’t know what it was?”

“No, Hannibal wouldn’t tell me.”

“Hmm. And what did Hannibal do then?”

“Nothing. We left.”

“You left?” She echoed disbelievingly.

“He wanted to take me back to the hotel.” Will said. “And then he was gonna go back and take care of Yuri by himself.”

Chiyoh blinked. “He didn’t want you with him?” She asked. “He didn’t try to convince you to help him?”

“No.”

“That doesn’t sound like him.”

“We had argued about it at dinner. Hannibal...didn’t like Yuri. And he knew I didn’t either. He wanted to kill him, but I made him promise me he wouldn’t.”

Chiyoh raised a sculpted eyebrow at that.

“I take it you weren’t too happy, then, when he went back on his word?”

“No.” Will muttered. “I had to beg him to stay with me.”

She seemed surprised by this, in a vague sort of way. “You convinced him not to go?”

Will nodded. “He said he wouldn’t leave me when I was so upset. I think that’s why he took me down to the bar - he was trying to get me to calm down.”

“And that’s when you were drugged?”

“Yeah. Right after you called Hannibal. I’m not sure what…” He trailed off when he caught sight of the look on her face. He had never seen her look so surprised, so caught off guard, before. “Chiyoh?” He asked hesitantly. “Is something wrong?”

“You said after I called him?” She repeated. Slowly, as if to make sure there were no misunderstandings between them.

“Yeah.” Will said, staring at her. “Why? What’s wrong?”

But Chiyoh didn’t seem to hear him - she sat back in her seat, eyes distant as she bit her lip.

“Will, this is really important.” She said after a moment. “Was Hannibal with you when he took that phone call?”

“Yeah. Why?” He asked her.

“You heard our...conversation?”

“Well, no, he left the room for that part.” Will told her, sitting up a bit. “Why? What were you talking about?”

“What about after?” Chiyoh pressed him, ignoring his question. “After he took my phone call, after you were drugged, he was with you for the rest of the night?”

“Yes. Answer me!” He snapped. “Why did you call him?”

Chiyoh just looked at him, her eyes like flint. Will swore.

“You have no right hiding things from me!” He snarled at her. “This isn’t a game - there’s too much at stake for you to be keeping secrets!”

“Do you not trust Hannibal to tell you what you need to know, Will?” She asked him calmly.

“That’s not what I said.”

“Then what did you say?”

“For fuck’s sa-I just want to know if something’s wrong! You get that don’t you?! I’m trying to help you! Now tell me what happened!”

She blinked once. Slowly. Unconcerned.

“I’m afraid that’s between us, Will.” She said. “If Hannibal wants to tell you, I’m sure he will.”

Furious, Will turned away from her, and the two sat in chilly silence until Hannibal returned from the kitchen.

“Here we are!” He said, bearing a large tray in his arms. “Chicken soup! I apologize for the simple meal, Chiyoh, but I’m afraid it’s the only thing Will admits that he likes.”

He offered one of the bowls to Chiyoh, and she accepted it with a small bow of thanks, her gaze fixed on Hannibal as he turned to Will.

“Come on, Will. Sit up for me.”

But Will shook his head, inching away from him and eyeing the bowl anxiously. “Hannibal, I can’t.”

“Just try it, Will. Just a few bites.”

Will took the bowl reluctantly. Hannibal and Chiyoh were both watching him closely as he lifted the spoon to his lips, and he flushed self-consciously as he swallowed a small mouthful. It settled heavily, uncomfortably, in his protesting stomach, and he only managed a few more bites before he set it aside.

“That’s not enough, Will.”

“I can’t.” Will told him. “I can’t eat any more.”

“Will.” Hannibal said slowly. “You’re not eating enough. You’re malnourished. If you don’t start eating more soon, I’m going to have to place a feeding tube-”

“NO!” Wil cried, jerking away from him and nearly falling off the couch. Hannibal caught him before he did, but Will twisted in his hold. He knew it wasn’t an idle threat - Hannibal would really do it if he thought Will needed it, regardless if Will agreed or not. He had done it before - Will could still remember the last time Hannibal had eased a tube down his throat. Still dreamt sometimes that he was choking around hard plastic as it was forced painfully further down... “Don’t you dare! I swear to God, Hannibal I’ll never forgive you-”

“Calm down, Will.” Hannibal said firmly, steadying him. “Easy, now. Sit back for me...”

Chiyoh’s attention never strayed, never once wavered, from the two of them as Hannibal maneuvered Will back onto the couch. She watched, unblinking, as Hannibal picked up the bowl and pressed it back into Will’s hands, encouraging him to finish his meal.

“Come on, Will. Just a few bites...That’s it.”

It took forever for Will to finish - he could only manage a few bites at a time before his stomach would give a sudden, uncomfortable lurch, and he was forced to wait until it settled before he could resume eating again. There were a few times while he was waiting that he almost fell asleep, but each time his eyes fluttered shut, Hannibal was quick to nudge him awake again, urging him to eat more.

“A couple more bites, mylimasis…come on, you’re almost done…”

By the time there were only a few sips left, Will was exhausted. Sprawled over the plush pillows and soft blankets, his stomach full and his eyes heavy, Will hovered on the edge of sleep. Hannibal must have felt sorry for him, because when his eyes slipped shut, he didn’t wake him again. Instead, Will felt Hannibal pull the bowl from his slackened grip.

“What happened to him?” He heard Chiyoh ask quietly.

“As best we can tell.” Hannibal replied. “Someone managed to slip something in his drink.”

“Slip him what?”

“I’m not sure. A hallucinogen of some kind, I believe.”

“Are you sure he’s okay?”

“He’s fine.” Hannibal told her as he began to run his fingers through Will’s hair. Lightly, like he was trying not to wake him. “It just needs time to work its way out of his system.”

“Any idea when that will be?”

“...Why, Chiyoh.” Hannibal said teasingly. “You almost sound as if you’re worried about him.”

“Please.” She scoffed. “I’m much more concerned with how this affects us than him.”

“It doesn’t affect us at all, I assure you.”

She fell silent again for a while. Hannibal’s hand had moved from Will’s hair to his cheek by the time she spoke again.

“Will says you didn’t get your papers.”

Hannibal’s caressing fingers suddenly stopped.

“Yuri broke our deal.” He explained.

“I heard. What did he want for them instead?”

Hannibal traced the outline of Will’s scar. “Something I couldn’t give him.”

“...What are you going to do now?” Chiyoh asked him. “You can’t leave the country, much less travel internationally, without a passport.”

“I’ll figure something out.”

Will hated that he sounded so unconcerned about it.

“As much as I hate to admit it,” Chiyoh said then, somewhat testily. “Will’s right - you can’t stay here for too long. It’s not safe.”

“I know.” Hannibal assured her quietly. “Believe me, Chiyoh, I have no intention of allowing myself to be caught - I won’t be separated from Will again.”

“If I were you,” Chiyoh said. “It’s not the *FBI* separating you that I would be worried about.”

Hannibal’s hand went rigid at her words, his nails digging sharply into Will’s flesh. Right over the damaged nerve. Will whimpered at the flare of pain that followed.

“Shh.” Hannibal hushed him, fingers gently brushing against Will’s scar again. “Shh, Will.”

Chiyoh was quiet, but it was easy to imagine her sitting across the room, her regal face betraying nothing as she watched Hannibal lull Will to sleep.

“You really love him, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Then you’re playing a dangerous game, Hannibal.” She said. “Please, be careful. For Will’s sake.”

—-------

“Will...Will…”

Will groaned, batting at the hands that were shaking his shoulders. “What? What is it?”

“Come on, Will.” Hannibal whispered, easing him upright. “You can’t spend the night on the couch. Let’s get you to bed.”

Will looked around the room as Hannibal pulled him to his feet. It was dark. Empty.

“Where’s Chiyoh?” He mumbled as Hannibal led him to the stairs.

“She went to bed already.” Hannibal told him. “It’s very late.”

“Mmm.” Will hummed. “I think she’s upset about something.”

Whoops. He hadn’t meant to say that.

“She’s not upset.” Hannibal said smoothly. Will could barely see him in the gloom. “She’s just worried about you.”

“Bullshit.”

There was a faint intake of breath from beside him, and Will realized it was a laugh. “She cares more about you than she lets on.”

“Yeah? Is that why she pushed me off a train?”

“Really, Will. That was years ago. Are you ever going to let it go?”

“No.”

Hannibal chuckled again as they came to a stop in front of Will’s room.

“Will you be alright on your own tonight?”

Will didn’t answer him. He was thinking about her. Her chilling laugh, her eerie song. Waiting for him. Just on the other side of the door. In the dark.

“Will?”

“...Can I sleep with you?” Will asked, hating himself.

“I beg your pardon?”

“You heard me.” Will mumbled, ducking his head despite knowing Hannibal couldn’t see him. “Can I sleep with you? Please?”

For a few terrifying seconds, Will thought he was going to say no.

“Of course you can, mylimasis.” Hannibal told him. His voice was warm, gentle. Pleased. “Darling boy, you don’t ever have to ask me that. Come on. Careful, now, watch your step...”

Will waited until they were off the stairs and back on the first floor before he asked his next question.

“What did Chiyoh call to tell you?”

“Hmm?”

“Last night. At the bar.” Will reminded him. “You were gone for a long time.”

“Ah, that. My aunt - Lady Murasaki - had called Chiyoh from Japan. She was trying to get a hold of me.”

“Is everything okay?”

“Everything’s fine.” Hannibal promised him as he pushed open his bedroom door. The curtains were open, and the room was bathed in the silvery light of the moon. “She just wanted to know what happened and if we needed a place to stay.”

“She offered to help you?” Will asked, surprised.

“She has helped me many times over the years.” Hannibal said. Will could see a faint smile playing at his lips as he turned down the covers of the bed. “We’re the only family we have left now. And it’s been so long since I’ve seen her...I admit I’m quite tempted to accept.”

Will tried to picture it, what it would be like living in Japan with Hannibal...

Bustling cities with neon lights and high rises. Mount Fuji in the distance, temples built beside babbling brooks, cherry blossoms in the spring. Good food and whiskey bars. A place that chased perfection, valued courtesy, enjoyed beauty. A place where Hannibal could be obnoxiously, ridiculously successful and appreciated no matter what he did. A place where making eye contact was considered rude. A place where Will would never have to look too closely, see too much, again. Maybe…maybe he could convince Hannibal to buy a house on the coast - someplace where he could spend his days on the sea, fishing, building boats, repairing them.

It was easier to imagine than Cuba. More realistic...

…Like it was actually possible for them to be happy…

“What did you tell her?”

“I told her I would think about it.” Hannibal said, helping him climb into the bed. “But I’m not sure it would be a good idea.”

“Why not?”

“Because,” Hannibal explained to him patiently. “The Japanese love authority, Will. And there is no higher authority than the law. If we were ever discovered, I assure you our presence would not be tolerated the way it would in other places.”

“Oh.” Will said, disappointed.

“Oh, indeed.” Hannibal said, drawing the covers up to Will’s chin. “Get some sleep, Will. You need it.”

Will waited until he felt the bed dip before he allowed himself to relax. He lay still and silent beside Hannibal in the darkness, listening to the quiet sound of his breathing as it slowly evened out.

He knew Hannibal was lying. But about what, and why, he wasn’t sure. Will bit his lip and rolled away from him, his thoughts racing.

What wasn’t Hannibal telling him? What had Chiyoh really called him about? And why had she seemed so shocked, even nervous, when Will told her he had been drugged right after she’d called? What did Chiyoh know that he didn’t?

And more importantly…

Just what was Hannibal supposed to do without a passport?

How were they ever going to leave now?

What was going to happen to them?

Chapter End Notes

I know Will comes off as really weepy/whiny/OOC in this chapter. But in my defense...
1. Vulnerable Will is my favorite.
2. He was given some pretty hardcore drugs in the previous chapter and they're still affecting him.
3. I don't think I did a good job of showing this in the writing, but Will has figured out by now that Hannibal will give him whatever he wants if he's upset/in distress. So Will is exaggerating a little bit because he's trying to manipulate Hannibal.

Also. I'm officially stuck with this story. When I started it, I had it planned up to this chapter, all the major events that follow, and the ending. I didn't really know what would happen in between Will getting drugged and the next big thing, but I hoped inspiration would hit me while I was writing these last few chapters. So far, it hasn't. I know the next few chapters need to be filler before the next big thing happens, but I'm struggling to come up with anything. So until I do, I will be taking a break from this story.

Thank you so much for reading!

Bright Light Living in the Shade

Chapter Summary

A series of vignettes

Chapter Notes

Fair warning, this chapter's not the most exciting one. It's mostly filler, but it's also setting up for future chapters.

Hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Three days after Hannibal and Will’s return from Atlanta, Chiyoh announced that she was leaving.

Will stared at her from across the breakfast table, oblivious to the fact that his eggs had dropped off his fork and were now splattered all over his plate and shirt.

“What?” He said stupidly. Chiyoh’s flint eyes flickered toward him briefly, but when she spoke again, the words were directed at Hannibal.

“I found an apartment in the city.” She explained. Her voice was calm. Measured. Reasonable. “Not far - only an hour away. I’ll still be nearby if you need me.”

Hannibal nodded, almost as if he expected something like this to happen. And Will supposed he probably should have seen it coming too - because while Chiyoh was always quiet, she had somehow become even quieter, even more withdrawn, since the night they got back.

Always watching, always ready.

Ready for what, Will didn't know.

Hannibal stirred his coffee and took a sip.

"When will you be leaving?" He asked her, regarding her over the rim of his mug.

"Three days."

He considered this. "Will you need any help?"

"Not at all. Please don't trouble yourself worrying about me."

They were so polite. So stiffly formal. Porcelain marionettes, acting out a play. Will looked from one to the other, and tried to swallow down the flare of anger that was building in his chest.

Will knew something had happened that night, the night they got back. Something that had changed everything. Something that neither Hannibal nor Chiyoh was telling him and something that they refused to acknowledge whenever he tried to bring it up.

Will didn't know what had happened.

But he knew that if it was bad enough to drive Chiyoh away, then it was something really bad.

—-------

Will found Chiyoh in her room. A suitcase was open on her bed, her clothes laid out beside it.

“Why are you leaving?” He asked her bluntly from the doorway. He was careful not to step inside.

Chiyoh stiffened ever so slightly at the sound of his voice, her ivory hands hovering over the open bag and the clothes she had already gathered inside. She recovered a moment later.

“I’m not leaving.” She explained to him. “I’ll still be nearby if I’m needed.”

Will glared at the back of her head.

“Why are you leaving the house?”

Always the Devil in the details when it came to Hannibal. Always having to ask the right question. And even then, always half answers and misdirection.

“Because it’s time I did.” Chiyoh said simply, picking up one of the shirts off the bed.

Will frowned. “You told me when we arrived that you would stay for as long as you were needed.”

“Yes.”

“So are you leaving because you think you’re not needed anymore?”

“I thought we established,” Chiyoh said, somewhat testily. “That I’m not leaving.”

“But you are.” Will insisted. “You’re putting sixty minutes between us - that’s a long time, especially if there’s an emergency and we need you.”

“If there’s an emergency, I trust you and Hannibal will be able to hold your own until I arrive.”

“But what about me?” Will asked her. “You said you don’t trust me, that you think I’m a threat to Hannibal. You’re really just going to leave me here alone with him?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I was wrong.”

“What?”

“I said I was wrong.” She snapped. “I see that now.”

Will was so shocked that for several moments he couldn’t speak.

“But that still doesn’t explain why you’re leaving!” He managed eventually. “If you don’t think I’m a threat but you think you might still be needed, then why move all the way across town? Why not just stay here?”

Chiyoh straightened very slowly and turned to look at him.

“I spent years in Castle Lecter.” She reminded him. “And I would have spent even longer there if you hadn’t come. I won’t do it again.”

“You think this house is a prison?”

“I think it has the potential to become one.”

Will stared at her.

“We can’t stay here forever.” He said slowly. “Hannibal knows that.”

Chiyoh raised a single eyebrow at him. “I’m sure he does.” She agreed. “But I’m not sure that he cares enough about the risks of staying to try and leave anytime soon.”

Will took a moment to try and understand what she was saying.

“...Do you...think he’s going to get us caught?”

“I think,” Chiyoh said, turning back to her bag. “When it comes to you, Hannibal has blind spots.”

Will watched her as she finished packing the last of her clothes and closed the lid of the suitcase.

“Please tell me what happened in Atlanta, Chiyoh.” He begged her quietly. “And don’t tell me nothing happened because I know something did - you’re running. I never thought I’d see you run from anything.”

Will thought he saw the slightest hint of a smile touch Chiyoh's lips as she set her bag at the foot of her bed. "He looks so human, doesn't he?" She asked, sounding almost fond. "It can be easy to forget what he really is."

She turned to look at Will. Her eyes looked suspiciously wet. "Do you ever forget?" She asked. Her voice was steady. "When you look at him, do you sometimes forget what it is you're looking at?"

Will shook his head.

"I do." She confessed. "I knew him before. When he was still on the brink of becoming what he is now. When there was some small part of him that was still human. I couldn't see it at the time, what was happening to him. Maybe I just didn't want to. But that's how we met. That's how I think of him. How I'll always think of him." She sighed then. "Don't ever forget what he is, Will." She advised him. "It's important that you don't."

"I know." Will promised her.

It was the first time she had ever looked at him with something other than contempt or distrust.

"I don't think you do."

She almost looked like she pitied him.

—-------

That night, Will lay beside Hannibal on his bed, his thoughts spinning as Hannibal scanned through a psychology journal on his tablet.

“Why do you think Chiyoh’s leaving?” He blurted out before he could stop himself.

“I don’t know.”

“I think you do.”

“I can only suspect.”

“And you suspect something.” Will pressed him, refusing to look at him. He was too scared to look at him - scared at what he’d find looking back.

“What makes you think she needs any other reason than the fact that she wants to, Will?”

“Because when we first came here, Chiyoh told me she wouldn’t leave you alone with me.” Will told him. “She said I was a threat…that she would stay as long as you needed her.”

“Then she must feel I no longer need her.”

“But why? What changed?”

“Perhaps she no longer considers you a threat.”

“But *why* ?”

“Maybe,” Hannibal said, lip curling, catching over his crooked incisor. “After seeing the state you were in the night I brought you home from Atlanta, she realized you weren’t nearly as dangerous as she believed you to be.”

Will scowled around his blush.

Hannibal did that sometimes - said or did something he knew would embarrass Will to distract him from a subject he didn't want to discuss.

Will knew he was doing it now. Just like he knew he shouldn't fold as easily as Hannibal expected him to. That he should demand an answer, fight for it, if he had to...

But he was tired.

So, so tired.

Tired of everything.

"I think there's more to it than that." He grumbled, rolling pointedly away from Hannibal.

"I doubt we'll ever know." Hannibal said, sounding thoroughly unconcerned by this fact. "Chiyoh is a very private person - if she doesn't want to explain herself, then she won't."

He made it sound so simple. So straightforward.

Will didn't even consider the possibility of using his empathy to understand what Chiyoh was thinking, her design, until he was on the very edge of sleep. But even as the thought occurred to him, he dismissed it.

He wasn't sure he really wanted to know.

The house was quieter after Chiyoh left.

So quiet.

Too quiet.

Sometimes, in the silence that seemed to fill the space Chiyoh left behind, Will would hear the soft creak of a floorboard overhead, the whisper of fabric moving around corners...

...A manic cackle in the night.

It chased him into Hannibal's bed every time he heard it.

Not that Hannibal seemed to mind - he was always more than happy to welcome Will into his arms, no matter the hour.

“Do you think I’m insane?” Will asked him one night, staring up at the shadows that hung heavy overhead. Somewhere out in the marsh, a stag was bellowing.

“That depends.” Came Hannibal’s voice from the darkness. “What is ‘insane’, Will?”

“You’re the fucking psychiatrist, you tell me.” Will snapped, dragging a pillow over his ears to try and drown out the sound of the deer roaring in the distance.

Whatever Hannibal’s response is, Will didn’t hear it through the pillow.

But he still could still hear the stag just fine.

The fields surrounding their house crept gradually into the marshlands of Lake Pontchartrain. After breakfast, Will usually spent his mornings trekking through the waist high grasses to the water's edge, where he would walk, memorizing the shoreline step-by-step.

"What is it you're doing out there, Will?" Hannibal asked him one morning before he left.

Will shrugged. "Not much."

"Would you like me to buy you a fishing pole?"

Will thought about it.

Hannibal had already bought him a new phone (there were only two numbers in his contact list - Hannibal's and Chiyoh's), his entire wardrobe, his every meal, his new life.

He'd hate to be any more indebted to him than he already was.

He slowly shook his head.

Hannibal bought him a fishing pole anyway. And a tackle kit. And a Louisiana fishing license in his fake name. Though the equipment was wrong, Will couldn't help but feel moved by Hannibal's gesture.

The feeling quickly withered and died when Hannibal insisted on following him out to the lake.

"Are there alligators in there?" He asked, nodding at the murky water.

"Probably." Will told him, casting the line. The pole was a spinning rod and reel combo - easy to use, something for a beginner.

The same thing Will had used some twenty-odd years ago, standing on the shore of this same lake with his daddy.

"Are you sure this is safe?" It took Will a moment to remember what Hannibal was talking about.

"It's fine." He said. "It's winter. They're brumating."

"They're what?"

"It's like hibernation." Will explained, watching the bobber as it drifted further away. "If they do wake up, it's not for long and they're usually pretty sluggish."

"Have you seen any?"

"No."

“When will they wake up again?”

“Soon as it warms up.” Will snapped, impatient with all the questions. “Why? Eager to meet your spirit animal?”

“I don’t know what that means.” Hannibal sniffed. “I just want to make sure you won’t get hurt out here.”

“Safer out here than I am in there.” Will muttered.

—-------

Will always found animal tracks along the muddy shore of the lake. Mice, ducks, opossums, armadillos, beavers, rabbits, otters, herons, skunks, moles, a bobcat once, raccoons, foxes...

…deer.

It seemed everywhere he looked, he saw hoofprints. Up and down the coast. All over their property.

He would follow them sometimes, hoping he would find the little buck again. He hadn’t seen it since their first morning at the house, but he knew it was still out there - he heard it all the time now, calling out into the empty night.

But no matter how far he walked, no matter how long and how hard he looked, he never found it. The trail would eventually fade away and Will would be left alone. Alone and with nothing but the feeling that what he was searching for was just outside his grasp.

Watching him.

Waiting for him.

Occasionally, Hannibal would drive to town and be gone for hours.

“Where are you going?” Will asked once, eyeing him suspiciously - he had started growing out his beard, and had taken to wearing a pair of costume glasses whenever he left the house.

Will hated that he kind of liked it.

“Nowhere important.” Hannibal said.

“But what are you *doing* ?”

“Nothing important.”

When he reached out to tuck a stray curl behind his ear, Will jerked away from him with a snarl. Hannibal sighed.

“There’s a bit of...local history I’m researching.” He confessed.

“What history?” Will pressed him, thinking of the dozens of stories, myths, and legends that surrounded New Orleans and wondering which one could have captured Hannibal’s interest.

...Probably Madame LaLaurie's torture chamber, if he had to guess...

Hannibal tapped him gently on the nose with a smile. "The only history that matters, mylimasis."

"Which is?" Will growled impatiently.

Hannibal's smile widened. "All in good time, my love. Until then, enjoy the mystery."

Yeah right. Because that had worked out so well for him before.

There were a number of local and national newspapers that Hannibal subscribed to, and they all were delivered to the house once a week. Hannibal didn't like it when Will read them - he read them fearfully, obsessively, scanning the headlines with his stomach in knots.

"Will, try and finish your breakfast."

"In a minute."

He saw their names only a few times and only in the bigger publications.

'Search For Lecter Continues - No Leads on the Infamous Killer' proclaimed *USA Today* a week after they disappeared.

‘Head of FBI’s Behavioral Science Unit Under Investigation’ *The New York Times* reported not long after.

And on the one month anniversary of their fight with Dolarhyde - ‘Lecter Spotted in Hawaii!’ announced the *National Enquirer* with a grainy photograph that could have been of anybody. Will snorted when he read that one.

“I wish.” He muttered, tossing it aside.

There was never anything solid. Nothing definitive. Nothing that ever pointed to the truth of where they were. There was only speculation, rumors, rehashing what everyone already knew. The weeks rolled by, and gradually, the articles became fewer and farther between.

And the local papers, the ones that really mattered, said nothing about them at all. They featured weather reports, play-by-plays of the Saints’ latest game, local crime, restaurant reviews...but nothing whatsoever about the FBI's largest manhunt in recent history.

—------

In the evenings, Hannibal would light a fire in the sitting room, and while he sat at his desk, sipping wine and perusing various medical journals and medieval texts, Will would lay draped across the sofa, reading one of the dozens of books that lined the shelves on either side of the fireplace.

It was a beautiful piece of furniture, Hannibal’s desk - a delicate, polished mahogany antique that he had caught Will admiring more than once.

“You like it?” He asked with an amused smile.

“Hard not to.”

“It’s from Vienna.” Hannibal explained. “And it has quite the history behind it. It belonged to the daughter of a nobleman - the most beautiful woman of her day, supposedly. Many men sought her hand, and she was eventually promised to a duke. But she had fallen in love with another man - a lowly carpenter. Naturally, their love was forbidden, and the girl’s father went to great lengths to keep them apart. But the story goes that it was the carpenter who built the desk for her, and that he built a secret compartment in which he left her a letter - a letter proclaiming his undying devotion to her and the details of his plan for them to run away together.”

“Really?” Will asked, tracing the roses that had been so painstakingly, so lovingly carved along the side . “Do you know where the compartment is?”

“Here.” Hannibal said, tapping the front of the desk.

“Does it open?”

“Only with the key.”

“I’m guessing it was lost?”

Hannibal blinked at him. “So it would seem.”

Will stroked the area over which the hidden compartment was, tapping it half-heartedly. It was hollow. “What happened to them? The lovers from Vienna?”

“She never found the letter. She married the man she was betrothed to, and she died of consumption a few years later. When the carpenter heard, he killed himself.”

“...Oh.”

“Yes, it’s quite tragic.” Hannibal said happily. “As most great love stories are.”

Will was quiet for a minute, thinking. “Are we...destined for tragedy?”

Hannibal cocked his head. “Is ours a love story, Will?”

Will shifted uncomfortably. “Some might say so, I think.”

“And what do you say?”

“I don’t know.”

“Then I suppose the answer depends.”

—-------

Will finally saw the little deer one morning while he was exploring the shoreline. A few miles from the house, he had stumbled upon the rotted remains of a dock collapsed among the cattails, and was testing whether it would hold his weight or not when a small sound caught his attention.

Jerking around, Will saw a young stag across the marsh, its black, liquid eyes staring back at him. Will straightened, the wood groaning under him, trying to get a better look...

Yes, he was sure it was the same one as before - it had the same delicate crown of antlers, the same dark flecks across its coat, the same piercing gaze that made Will feel so uneasy...

Then the buck tossed its proud head with a snort, its breath circling its head like a halo as it turned and slipped silently away into the brush.

Will slowly released the breath he didn't even realize he was holding and climbed carefully down from the dock on shaking legs. It felt like it took him forever to reach the spot where the deer had been only a few moments ago.

There were no tracks, no bent or broken blades of grass where the deer had stood or anywhere nearby.

It was almost as if it had never been there at all.

"Can I come with you the next time you go to town?"

Hannibal seemed surprised. "You want to come?"

Will nodded. "There's some things I want to get."

Everywhere Will looked, there was food. Rows and rows of stalls just filled with it - buckets of shining apples, plump berries, trailing bunches of grapes. Crates of cabbages, squash, celery, peppers, and onions. Bags of peanuts, jars of jellies. Fish and prawns laid invitingly over ice, humming tanks filled with lobsters and crabs. The smell of freshly baked bread in one direction, spices in another. Trays of dainty chocolates, hocks of bloody lamb.

Hannibal spoke with everyone, ignoring Will's worried glares and impatient hisses, sampling everything he was offered with a smile. There were even a few times he addressed the vendors in the local tongue.

"I thought you couldn't understand Cajun French." Will said under his breath as they turned away from an older Creole woman. Hannibal had caught him singing songs from his childhood a few times, and had been intrigued by the foreign words, the way Will pronounced them, demanding that he repeat them, slowly this time, and then explain their meaning. Will had grumbled and rolled his eyes, embarrassed, but indulged him nonetheless.

"It's certainly different from what I'm used to, and some people are easier to understand than others." Hannibal told him. "But between listening to you and coming here as often as I do, I believe I manage quite well."

"Hmm."

He followed Hannibal through the crowd. Children shied away from Will as he walked by, staring up at his mangled face with wide, fearful eyes and open mouths. A few women looked at him with pity, but most couldn't quite contain their shock when they saw him, their smiles faltering in horror before they quickly righted them again, far too fixed and rigid to be genuine. Men eyed him narrowly, sizing him up, trying to decide whether or not he was a threat. Eyes followed Will wherever he went, dragging over him, piercing him, and everywhere he turned, he tasted bitter fear and distrust.

Will tried not to let it bother him.

"Is that all you wanted?" Hannibal asked him when Will dropped a handful of pears into a bag. "Nothing else?"

"No, this is it."

“Will you be able to eat those?” Hannibal was frowning - ever since their return from Atlanta, he had been determined to get Will to eat more, to regain some of the weight he had lost. Most of the foods he prepared for him were soft, easy to chew, things Will couldn’t refuse.

Will could understand his concern as he held the small, hard fruit in his hand.

“It’s fine.” He told him, tying the bag closed and shuffling over to the vendor to pay.

Will was hard to look at now, he knew that. Most days he didn’t really care, but lately…

He stared at himself in the mirror, at the enormous scar that stretched across his face, and traced the edge of the puckered flesh with a light finger.

The nerve beneath twitched irritably.

“Do I…” Will hesitated. He knew Hannibal was listening, watching him closely. “Does it bother you? My scar?”

“Not at all.” Hannibal assured him, moving closer. He wrapped his arms around Will, nuzzling the damaged skin with his nose. “It’s beautiful.”

“No, it’s not.” Will said quietly, staring at their reflection.

It really wasn’t - it made him look like something from Picasso’s nightmares.

“It is.” Hannibal insisted. “Our scars are pieces of our story that we’ll always have. Proof that we were stronger than what tried to break us. They’re keepsakes, ornaments of the flesh. Each one more beautiful than the last.”

As he spoke, his hands trailed lightly over Will’s abdomen. Over the jagged scar that he had put there all those years ago.

Will couldn’t help but shiver.

But not because he was horrified.

Though Will hadn’t seen her since that night in Atlanta, he had heard her plenty of times since then - rummaging around in Chiyoh’s empty room, quietly muttering and laughing to herself. What she was doing in there, what she was looking for, he didn’t know, and he had no intention of finding out. He avoided that end of the hall, warily eyeing the closed door every time he passed it by. And he probably would have continued to do so if not for the loud, metallic clanging that erupted from the other side of the door late one night, so loud and sudden that it had Will sitting bolt upright in bed with a gasp. Hannibal stirred slightly beside him.

“What was that?”

“What was what, Will?” Hannibal mumbled.

“That noise.” Will breathed. “It came from upstairs-”

“You were dreaming, darling.” Hannibal soothed him, tugging him gently back down.

“No, I heard it-”

“Shh.” Hannibal said, rubbing his back. “Go back to sleep, now.”

But Will didn’t sleep. Couldn’t sleep. He spent the rest of the night lying stiffly in Hannibal’s arms, listening for the sound to sound again.

But it never came.

And when the dawn finally broke over the horizon, Will knew what he needed to do. What he couldn’t avoid any longer.

He cautiously pushed Chiyoh’s door open and peered into the silent emptiness beyond. It seemed like it was waiting for him. He took a few hesitant steps forward. His soft footfalls seemed to echo in the stillness, shattering it.

It felt like he was stepping inside a monastery.

Or a tomb.

With a shudder, Will moved swiftly through the room, eager to get out as quickly as he could. His eyes raked over the gleaming wood floors, the simple furniture, the bare walls. He checked her dresser, but it was empty. So was the desk. And the closet. He checked again, running his hands along the smooth panels, searching for any breaks along the surface, any notches in the grain. He rapped the walls, pulled back the smooth sheets on the bed and then lifted the mattress. Nothing. No matter where he looked, no matter where he turned, there was nothing anywhere.

It was just as he was turning to leave that the low light of the setting sun caught the winking, metal edge of something under the bed.

With a sigh, Will crouched reluctantly down to get a better look and found a simple, metal case. He pulled it out. Tried to open it, and found that it was locked.

“What do you think she has in there?” Will asked Hannibal later that evening, cutting an onion for their dinner.

“Nothing important, I’m sure.”

“If it’s not important, then why did she lock it?”

“If it’s so important, why didn’t she take whatever’s inside with her?”

Will had just turned to reply that maybe she hadn’t been able to, when the knife slipped from his grasp, slicing his thumb. Under the blood, between the parted flesh, was hard, white bone.

Hannibal stitched him back together over the sink.

“Be careful, mylimasis.” He scolded gently as he finished wrapping a piece of gauze around the throbbing wound. “Don’t you know how precious you are to me?”

When he kissed the blood from his fingers, Will almost forgot what they were talking about.

Almost.

Later, while Hannibal was in the shower, Will went into Chiyoh’s room and took the case out from under her bed. He hid it in his wardrobe, in the secret compartment. He hoped it would be safe there until he could find something he could use to pick the lock.

...That Hannibal wouldn't find it before then.

Hannibal wasn't happy when he caught Will tossing the pears out across the fields one morning.

"I bought those for you." He said, narrowed eyes tracking the arcing progress of a pear as it sailed through the air.

"I'll pay you back for them." Will promised him.

"That's not the issue, William."

"Then what is?"

"The issue," Hannibal told him, arms crossed over his chest, "Is that I bought them for *you* to eat, and you're throwing them away to wild animals."

"Deer like pears." Will said simply, as if that was all the explanation Hannibal needed.

"I don't care if deer like pears. I care about what *you* like and what *you'll* eat."

"Well, I don't like pears."

Hannibal sighed heavily, his eyes rolling briefly toward the overcast sky before they swiveled inevitably back to Will. He watched him silently for a few minutes before he spoke again.

“How the mighty have fallen.” He murmured after a moment, watching as another pear disappeared under the swaying grass. “You’ve made quite the downgrade it would seem, from fishing for killers to fishing for deer. I wonder what Jack would say if he were here.”

“I’m not *fishing* for deer.” Will snapped, feeling oddly defensive about what exactly it was he was doing.

“Then the pears aren’t bait? You’re not luring your prey in?”

“You can’t lure something that’s already there.” Will huffed.

“There are deer here?”

“At least one.”

“I haven’t seen any.”

“Really?” Will asked him, glancing over his shoulder. “I’ve seen him a couple times now. Haven’t you heard him?”

“No.”

Will turned and stared at him. “You haven’t heard him?”

“I was unaware that deer made any sounds at all.”

“Of course they make sounds. This one never shuts up. He’s been roaring almost every night.”

“Roaring?”

“It’s a mating call.” Will explained impatiently. “You seriously haven’t heard it?”

“I might have.” Hannibal said with a shrug. “Maybe I just didn’t know what it was.”

“Hmm.” Will said. “Well, the next time he does it, I'll let you know.”

“I can hardly wait.” Hannibal drawled, turning away from Will as he lobbed another pear across the field.

Hannibal passed Will his tablet one morning.

“Look, Will.”

He had it open to the TattleCrime website, to an article Freddie Lounds had posted the night before about them. Will felt his stomach clench at the familiar site (sight), the toast and coffee he just swallowed threatening to come up again as he began to read.

“‘After two months of searching, the FBI has officially declared missing fugitive Hannibal Lecter and former special agent Will Graham dead…’”

Will stared at the words, uncomprehending, disbelieving, and looked at Hannibal, who smiled back and gently pulled the tablet from his shaking hands.

“It’s over, mylimasis.” He murmured. “No more worrying - we’re finally free.”

_____

Hannibal never pushed him.

No matter how many nights Will climbed into his bed, woke shaking and gasping in his arms, Hannibal never demanded anything from him in return. He simply pulled Will close, tucking the blankets tightly around them. Sometimes, he would press a kiss against Will’s forehead.

“Goodnight, Will.” He whispered every time.

“Night.” Will mumbled shyly back.

He always wondered why Hannibal didn't ask for more.

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“I think I should get a job.”

Will was sure that if Hannibal were a lesser man (or more of a man and less of the Devil), he would have choked on his wine.

“I’m sorry, Will.” He said after a long moment. “I must have misheard you. I could have sworn you just said you wanted to get a job.”

“That is what I said.” Will scowled.

Hannibal blinked. “Will, I’m more than capable of taking care of you-”

“That’s not why I want a job.” Will snapped.

“Then why do you?”

“Because I’m bored.” Will told him, ignoring the affronted look on Hannibal’s face. “I can’t keep wandering around in the fields all day every day - I need something to do.”

“There are plenty of other things you can do to occupy your time - you can come with me to town, you can fish -”

“No.” Will said firmly. “I need this. I need something to keep me busy, Hannibal. To keep my mind off things.”

“Will-” Hannibal began with a sigh.

But Will wouldn’t hear it.

He had already decided.

They were driving back from town one evening when Will saw a familiar, lonely gas station on the horizon.

“Hey, pull in here.”

“Why? We have more than half a tank.”

“There’s someone I need to talk to.”

Hannibal looked over at him sharply. “Who?”

“Friend of mine.”

Whether Hannibal was intrigued or jealous was hard to say as he pulled wordlessly into Nadine’s service station. Will felt his stomach flutter uneasily when Hannibal climbed out of the car with him.

“You don’t have to come in with me, you know.”

“I know.” Hannibal reassured him. “I’m curious.”

‘Never a good thing, that.’ Will thought to himself as he led Hannibal silently across the parking lot to the front door. He stepped over the line of brick dust, careful not to disturb it. It was only once he pulled the door open that he realized Hannibal was no longer behind him. He glanced back over his shoulder.

Hannibal was standing in the middle of the parking lot, staring up at the gas station with a curiously blank expression, his hands in his pockets and his back ramrod straight.

“What are you doing?” Will called to him with a frown. “Come on.”

Hannibal blinked and took a small step forward…and then immediately stepped back again. “Forgive me, Will.” He said. “But I think I would prefer to wait for you here.”

“Are you serious?” Will asked him, turning a bit so he could face him better. “Why?”

Hannibal didn’t answer him. He continued to stand, still as a statue, staring silently at Will.

“What the hell’s wrong with you? You’re really not going to come in?”

“No.”

“Well, that’s rude.”

Hannibal shrugged. “Rudeness is subjective. It’s a matter of opinion.”

“Well, at least you know that.” Rolling his eyes, Will quickly ducked inside the gas station and let the door slam loudly behind him. “Fucking drama queen.”

Nadine was behind the cash register. When she looked up and saw Will, she grinned.

“Hi, honey!” She said, moving around the counter and pulling Will into a hug. “How you been?”

“Um, good.” Will stuttered, blushing furiously around an embarrassed smile. “How about you?”

“Baby, I’ve been nothin’ but blessed.”

‘Probably better that Hannibal didn’t meet her.’ Will thought. ‘Nothing he’d love more than to take her joy and crush it.’

“Good.” He said aloud. “I’m glad.”

“Hmm.” Nadine hummed, stepping back and looking him up and down. “You look better than the last time I saw you. You finally leave that good-for-nothin’ boyfriend of yours?”

“He’s not...we’re...it’s complicated.”

“That’s a ‘no’ if I ever heard one.” Nadine said, shaking her head at him. “He hurt you any more since I saw you last?”

“No.” Will lied, hand drifting to his throat, to the bruises that had healed weeks ago.

“Mmm-hmmm.” Nadine hummed doubtfully, giving him a stern look that said she didn’t believe him at all. She nodded at the window. “He out there?”

“Yes.” Will admitted, looking over anxiously. He could see that Hannibal was still exactly where he’d left him - standing in the middle of the parking lot and staring at the gas station like the creep he was. “Listen, I was wondering if you could help me out with something.”

“Sure thing, honey, what’cha need?”

“A job?” Will asked her. “I’m trying to save up some money on the side. Just in case.”

Nadine frowned at him. “He know you’re lookin’ for a job?”

“He knows.” Will told her.

“That gonna be a problem for you?”

“No.” Will said firmly. “I mean, he’s not happy about it, but he’s agreed to let me work.”

“Oh, well, ain’t that mighty generous of him?” Nadine drawled, rolling her eyes.

“Please, can you help me?” Will asked her. “Do you know someone who’s hiring? I’ll take anything.”

Nadine pursed her lips, considering. “Can’t think of anyone right now.” She said after a while. “But I’ll ask around. Someone’s always lookin’ for more help.”

“Thank you.” Will told her with a smile. “Thank you so much.”

“You got a number I can call if I find anything?”

Will scribbled it down on the back of a receipt for her.

“Anything else I can help you with, ‘hon?”

“Some gas?” Will asked, holding up a twenty.

“What pump ya at?”

After she had rung him up, Nadine glanced once more out the window. “You mind if I say ‘hello’ to your boyfriend?”

“Uh,” Will said, watching as she strode out from behind the checkout desk and toward the door. “I don’t know if that’s a good idea…”

“I just wanna say hello.” Nadine said, grabbing the door handle and pulling it. “Nothin’ wrong with that, is there-”

She stopped suddenly in the open doorway, staring out across the lot. Will craned his head over her shoulder, trying to see what she was looking at, but all he saw was Hannibal, staring stonily back.

“What’s wrong?” He asked her quietly.

Rather than answer, she reached for Will with her free arm and drew him close.

“You stay right here with me, baby.” She murmured, patting him reassuringly.

“Why? What’s wrong?” Will asked, terrified for a moment that she had recognized Hannibal.

“Nothin’.” She whispered. “Jus’ stay here.”

Hannibal’s eyes were locked on Nadine’s hand, the way it was wrapped protectively around Will. Will quickly pulled himself free.

“Nadine, this is my boyfriend, uh...Vlad.”

Hannibal took his gaze off Nadine long enough to level Will with a thoroughly unimpressed glare, and Will shrugged back, however slightly.

“Your boyfriend, huh?” Nadine said, still watching Hannibal, as if he were a cobra curled up at her feet.

“Yep.” Will said through his teeth, hoping and praying that Hannibal would play along.

Hannibal’s smile was more of a sneer - nothing but contempt as he took a single step forward.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Miss.” Hannibal said to her. “Will has spoken very highly of you.”

“...Uh huh.” Nadine said, eyes dragging up and down Hannibal’s frame.

A few minutes of awkward silence passed before Hannibal finally turned his attention to Will.

“Will, dear.” He called, voice oozing with saccharine sweetness. “Why don’t you say goodbye to your friend? We need to be going now.”

Will quickly nodded, and had just turned to Nadine when she grabbed him and tugged him close.

“I’m gonna get’chu help, honey.” She whispered in his ear. “I promise I’m gonna help you in whatever way I can, okay? But you gotta be careful for me until then, you hear?”

“Yes’m.” Will answered dutifully, his Southern accent slipping out in an effort to soothe Nadine’s clear distress.

“Good boy.” She said, patting him one last time before she released him. She watched with her arms folded over her chest, shifting unhappily back and forth on her feet as Will crossed the distance to Hannibal. When he was close enough, Hannibal pulled Will possessively under his arm.

“I bought gas.” Will informed him quickly, hoping to distract Hannibal as he took him back to the car.

“I’ll take care of it.” Hannibal assured him shortly, opening his door. “Just get in the car.”

Will obeyed, if only for Nadine’s sake.

When they finally pulled away, Will watched the station as it slowly disappeared from view in his mirror. His eyes prickled dangerously and he blinked.

“Please don’t hurt her.” He whispered, not trusting his voice to hold steady if he spoke any louder. “She’s a good person.”

“I’m sure she is.” Hannibal said crisply, his eyes fixed straight ahead and his shoulders tense. Will swallowed thickly around the lump in his throat.

...He had once accused Hannibal that he didn’t want Will to have anyone else in his life besides Hannibal, and Hannibal hadn’t denied it...

Before Hannibal, all Will had wanted was to be normal. Maybe even good. So he reached for people, desperate for contact, and in the process, he had lost himself. He reached for Alana and he became the way she saw him (Poor broken bird. Poor tortured soul). He reached for Jack and he was just like him (Righteous anger. Demanding justice). Before Hannibal, he was whatever everyone else decided he was. Hannibal had been the one to show him that. He had helped him see who he really was, what he could be…

But he wasn't ready to choose Hannibal then. Instead, he chose Molly and Walter. And he played devoted husband, doting father for a while (Working nine to five on weekdays. Farmers' markets and baseball games on weekends. Screaming silently with boredom, slowly suffocating, every single day).

Was it any wonder why he chose Hannibal the second he had the chance? Why he would still choose him if he had to do it all over again?

Why he would always choose him?

Because with Hannibal, Will was free. He felt calm, grounded, centered. He could breathe easy when he was with Hannibal. Think clearly. He felt like he was himself, not someone else. Not what someone else wanted him to be. When he was with Hannibal, Will knew who he was.

But to choose Hannibal was to deny himself everyone else. Before Hannibal, Will couldn't be around people because to do so was to allow himself to be killed slowly but surely. And he couldn't be around people now because to do so was to condemn them to die at Hannibal's cruel hands.

Stupid. He had been stupid involving Nadine - he had as good as killed her the second he walked into her gas station. Because Hannibal was a jealous man and a petty one, a child who had never learned to share. His judgment was biblical, of the Old Testament variety. As far as Hannibal was concerned, Will was his and no one else's. He would not tolerate a stranger's eyes on Will, their hands on him - he'd sooner cut them off, the offense too great for words. Will knew that. Just like he knew there probably wasn't much he could do to stop Hannibal from going after Nadine now that she had committed the ultimate taboo, worse than any of the cardinal sins.

But he had to try.

"Please, Hannibal." Will begged him quietly. "She was kind to me once when she had no reason to be. When I needed it most. Please don't. Please. For me."

Not so very long ago, Hannibal had agreed to help Will only if he said ‘please’. It had been enough for Hannibal then.

Will hoped it would be enough to save Nadine from Hannibal’s wrath now.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Hannibal’s shoulders relax, however slightly.

“I won’t hurt her.”

Will collapsed against his seat, and released a long, slow breath. “Thank you.”

They were quiet for a long time after that.

“Why didn’t you come in?” Will asked eventually, risking another glance at Hannibal. “You were going to - why didn’t you?”

Hannibal seemed to be thinking about his answer carefully.

“What was on the ground?”

Will blinked. “What?”

“The red powder. On the ground outside the door. You made sure not to touch it.”

“It’s brick dust.” Will explained quickly. “It’s used in voodoo.”

“Used for what, exactly?”

Will shrugged. “Some people believe that if you lay a line in front of a door, it prevents people who want to harm you from getting inside.”

“...Really.” Hannibal said disdainfully. “People actually believe that?”

“Welcome to New Orleans.” Will snapped. “Now are you gonna answer me or not?”

“Please, Will. Do you really think I would ever set foot inside a gas station?” Hannibal scoffed. “It’s like you don’t know me at all.”

Nadine called him two days later.

“Hey, honey, how ya doin’?”

“I’m good, thanks.” Will said, sitting upright on the sofa and setting *Carmilla* aside. It was a relief to hear her voice, to know she was still alive. “How about you?”

“Oh, I’m fine, hon, I’m always fine. Don’t you worry none about me.” She said. “Look, honey, I won’t keep ya long. I jus’ wanted to tell ya that I may have found ya a job.”

“What?” Will cried, shocked and amazed and a little touched that she had found one for him so fast. “Really? What is it?”

“Friend of mine - Ronny - he owns a bar not far from the station. He’s havin’ shoulder surgery in about a week. Won’t be able to run the bar for a while. Sound like something you

could do?”

Ronny was probably in his late fifties but he looked like he was pushing seventy. He kept his arms folded and glared at Will from across the table while Nadine chatted cheerfully between them.

“Lord’s lookin’ out for you, honey. Day after you stopped by my station I bumped into Ronny in the checkout line at Rouses’. You shoulda seen his cart - man was stockin’ up fit for the Apocalypse!”

“Might as well be, way that quack makes this surgery sound.” Ronny growled, shaking his head. “Biggest scam there ever was, this country’s medical system * - ten-to-one they actually fix my shoulder at all. Betcha I come out even worse than I was before.”

“Ronald, you can’t even lift your arm to pass a glass no more.” Nadine said, rolling her eyes. “There ain’t no possible way you can come out worse than that.”

“Oh yes I can.” Ronny snapped. “Maybe while they’re diggin’ around in there they say they find somethin’ suspicious and haveta cut the whole thing off. How’s that for worse?”

“Well, then at least you’ll find somethin’ else to bitch and moan about other than how much your shoulder hurts.”

“And how long will you be out?” Will interjected, desperate to steer the subject away from where it was heading.

“Couple weeks.” Ronny grunted. “Arm’ll be in a sling - won’t be able to do nothin’ strenuous for a while. And they’re tellin’ me I need physical therapy for at least two months.”

“That’s a long time.”

“Yeah, tell me about it.” Ronny scowled, as if his bad shoulder was somehow Will’s fault. “So how ‘bout it, kid? You interested or not?”

“Yeah, I’m definitely interested.”

“Ya ever run a bar before?”

“Um. No.”

Ronny sighed.

“Well, lucky for you, I got no other options.” He said, taking a pack of cigarettes from his pocket and pulling one out. “And lucky for me, the job’s stupid easy - I doubt you can fuck it up too bad.”

“Um...thanks.”

“Don’t thank me yet, boy.” Ronny said, sticking the cigarette between his teeth and lighting it. “I’ve been wrong before.”

Ronny’s bar was in the middle of nowhere and looked like it was one good thunderstorm away from collapse.

“We don’t get much traffic out here.” He told Will, leading him inside. “Thank God. I don’t think a tourist has ever been so lost that they wandered in here. We get mostly locals, a few motorcyclists passin’ through. People who jus’ want a cold beer and some time away from whatever’s drivin’ ‘em in. Nobody wantin’ to be impressed. We got basic stuff on tap.” He continued, taking Will behind the bar. “Miller, Coor’s, Budweiser. Bottles in here. Whiskey, Henassey, and rum on the shelf. I keep gin and vodka jus’ in case, but no one ever orders it.”

He took Will to a room in the back of the building. There was a stainless steel sink filled with dirty glasses, and a refrigerator humming in the corner. Kegs of beer lined one wall, along with bags of lemons, limes, and oranges. Opposite to the door they just came through was another.

“Delivery’s once a week.” Ronny explained. “Every Thursday. Don’t worry about schedulin’ or payin’ - I’ve already got that set up. All you gotta do for that is just be here to open this door for ‘em. You good so far?”

“So far.”

“Good.” Ronny grunted, taking him back to the main room. “Hours are two to one, Wednesday through Saturday. Like I said, it’s usually pretty quiet. But if you need it, there’s a shotgun under the bar - you know how to use one?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Try not to if you don’t have to - it’d be a pain in the ass to explain to the cops.”

“Trust me, the last thing I want is to explain myself to the cops.”

Ronny held up a hand. “Look, kid, I’m sure you got a story, but I don’t wanna hear it - the less I know about someone, the more I like him.”

“Fine by me.” Will said with a shrug.

“And one other thing.” Ronny nodded up at an ancient TV mounted to the wall behind the bar. “That stays on ESPN, you understand? I don’t watch the news and I refuse to play it here. People come here to relax - that means no news, no politics.”

“You...you don’t watch the news?”

“Hell, no.” Ronny scowled, crossing his arms. “What for? Ain’t nothin’ but a buncha lies paid for by power-hungry multimillionaire CEOs and politicians. What good’s it gonna do anybody to watch?”*

“...Wow.” Will said, staring at him and wondering if it was a good thing or a bad thing that he had just been hired by the one person on earth who had probably never even heard of Hannibal Lecter. “...And just how exactly are you supposed to know what's going on in the world?”

“Boy, you think I wanna know what’s going on in the world?” Ronny snapped. “I got my own damn problems to worry about. Now come on, I need to show you how the register works…”

Later that night, Will was leaning against Hannibal on the couch, his eyes heavy with exhaustion and wine. Hannibal’s arm was around his shoulders, his thumb stroking lightly back and forth across Will’s carotid artery.

“Are you ready for your new job tomorrow?” He asked. His tone was light, but Will could tell he wasn’t happy.

“I think so.” Will mumbled, burrowing closer to him. “I don’t think it’ll be that hard.”

“Hmm. I still don’t understand why you want it at all.” Hannibal said. “You’ve spent weeks agonizing about us getting caught - aren’t you worried someone will recognize you?”

Will resisted the urge to touch the jagged scar that cut across the cheek. “I don’t think anyone will ever recognize me anymore. And besides, the FBI has officially declared us dead, remember?”

“So they have.” Hannibal mused. He was quiet for a while, his thumb moving back and forth, back and forth, across Will’s throat. “Is there anything I can say to convince you not to go?”

“No.” Will mumbled grumpily, his eyes fluttering shut. “I already promised I would help.”

“I’m sure someone else could help.”

“Why does it bother you so much if I have a job?”

Hannibal didn’t answer him right away.

“...I don’t like when you’re away from me any more than you have to be.” He admitted eventually. “I’ve been away from you for so long, Will. I was starting to think I would never see you again.” He heaved a small sigh. “I don’t ever want to be apart from you again, mylimasis.”

“Most psychiatrists consider codependency unhealthy, you know.”

“I’m not most psychiatrists.”

“And don't we all know it.” Will quipped around a yawn. “Don’t worry. I already told you - the only way you’d ever lose me was if you lied to me again.”

“...I know.” Hannibal said quietly, so quietly Will almost didn’t hear him.

Will wondered why he sounded so sad.

Chapter End Notes

Next one will be a lot more exciting, I promise!

Your Cold Heart Makes My Spirit Shake

Chapter Summary

Hannibal learns the truth about what happened to Will's mother

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Though Ronny had warned him that it was usually pretty slow and that the most complicated thing anyone had ever ordered was a gin and tonic, Will was still nervous as he prepared the bar for the evening. He glanced at the stack of freshly washed glasses and lemons he had hauled from the storeroom, checked the bottles on the shelves and in the mini-fridge, and wiped down the countertop for the third time since he'd arrived.

Hannibal had wanted to come with him. For "moral support", he said. But as the hands of the clock drifted gradually closer and closer to opening, he was glad he'd made Hannibal stay home - Will was sure that if he were here, he'd be having a field day, savoring his distress like an expensive wine and doing everything he could to make it worse. Wind him up and watch him go, so to speak…

At two o'clock, Will unlocked the front door and settled himself behind the bar, preparing himself for the worst.

But the hours passed slowly - Will swore he could physically feel them dragging by - and the bar remained empty. It was so quiet, so uneventful, so *boring* , that Will was actually relieved when someone finally did come in a little before seven.

"Hey!" He called to the old man as he shuffled closer. "What can I get'cha?"

"Whatever you got on tap." The man said, easing himself onto the barstool. He squinted at Will with rheumy eyes. "Wow. Ronny wasn't kiddin', was he?"

“About what?” Will asked, shoving a glass under the nearest spigot.

“‘Bout gettin’ someone to help out while he’s laid up.” The man grunted. “Never thought I’d see the day.”

“I don’t think he had much choice.” Will said, handing him the glass.

The old man snorted, and raised a shaky hand to take a sip of his drink. “Not likely, long as he put that surgery off, stubborn bastard.”

Will nodded, not quite sure what to say to that, and leaned back against the wall, crossing his arms over his chest in a pathetic attempt to shield himself from the awkwardness that had descended so quickly upon them. Will wasn’t good at small talk, never had been, and it was just starting to hit him that that was exactly what he was expected to do for the rest of the night. The thought was enough to make his stomach turn and sink.

It was one of the things he envied most about Hannibal, his uncanny ability to always know exactly what to say in any situation. Will understood his technique well enough - Hannibal was a psychopath and a psychiatrist rolled into one. He just sat back, kept quiet, and he listened. The first thing he heard that he could use, he grabbed it. And the sad thing was, Will was more than capable of doing the exact same thing. The only difference was that he carried the risk of taking on too much, of losing himself if he did, whereas Hannibal had no such problem.

The old man smacked his lips loudly and set the drink back down. “So how didja get the job?” He asked, his watery eyes drifting vaguely toward the television in the corner. “I doubt Ronny would give it to jus’ anybody.”

“Someone recommended me to him.”

“Who?”

“Woman named Nadine.”

“Hmm.” The old man hummed approvingly. “Good woman.”

“Yeah, she is.”

“Had more heartache than she deserves.” He took another sip of beer. “You watch the Saints?”

“Not really.”

“Don’t blame ya.” The man said. “They don’t look good this year.”

“They always start slow. Maybe they’ll turn it around.”

“Hope so. I got money on ‘em.”

The rest of the night passed uneventfully. Most of the people who came in were older, blue-collar, working class men, tired after a long day and carrying the weight of the world on their shoulders, looking for some small relief at the bottom of a bottle. They were quiet, easy to please, and the night passed without any issue. But even so, Will was relieved to finally close the bar and head home.

He was surprised to find that Hannibal had a light on for him, and the sight stirred something that felt suspiciously and uncomfortably like affection in his chest. He quickly shoved it aside.

Will crept silently up the front porch steps (avoiding the one that squeaked), and into the house, shutting the door carefully behind him. By the gentle glow of the sitting room lamp,

Will could see Hannibal's bedroom door at the end of the hallway, and he felt a sharp twinge of disappointment when he saw that it was closed, the dark shadows underneath. He had been hoping that Hannibal would still be awake when he got back.

"Will?"

Will jumped, whipping around to find Hannibal lounging in the sitting room, a thick file folder in his lap.

"How was your night?" He asked quietly, setting the file aside and rising to his feet.

"Good."

Hannibal smiled at him, his expression soft as he reached out, drawing Will close. "No trouble?"

Will shook his head. "No." He said with a yawn.

"Good." Hannibal said. Will buried his face in his chest, eyes fluttering shut, and Hannibal squeezed him gently. "Come, mylimasis. It's very late, and you're tired."

Will nodded and allowed himself to be led down the shadowy hall to Hannibal's room.

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Will's first week passed quickly, each new day the same as the last - he'd wake up late, have brunch with Hannibal, leave for the bar in the afternoon, serve a few people some beers, and come home to Hannibal waiting for him. It was structured. Routine.

Normal.

Will wondered how long it would last.

—-------

Will woke with a sigh. He shifted a bit, refusing to open his eyes as he burrowed deeper into the solid warmth that surrounded him. As he dozed, the sun continued to climb higher and higher, the bright rays tugging at him insistently, pulling him further from sleep. Will sighed again, wishing that the morning would never have to end - he couldn't remember the last time he had slept so well, had woken so content, had experienced a morning as perfect as this one.

Well. Almost perfect. He could do without the growing pressure in his groin, the need for release.

Will rolled his hips against the firm surface he was pressed against, and moaned at the pulse of pleasure that followed. He bucked again, harder this time, chasing the sensation, and when he did, the air around him stirred. It sounded like a laugh. Confused, Will opened his eyes.

Hannibal smirked back at him. "Good morning."

Will felt the blood rush to his face. "Oh!" He gasped, trying to pull away, but Hannibal held him still, nudging his thigh back between Will's legs.

"Please, Will." He purred as he began to thrust his leg back and forth. Will gasped again, and gripped Hannibal tighter to try and steady himself. "Don't stop on my account."

It took Will a few moments to pull himself together. “S-stop!” He demanded, pushing against Hannibal. “Let go!”

Hannibal released him immediately, and Will quickly scrambled away from him to the edge of the bed, hunched over in a vain attempt to cover himself. He panted, his groin throbbing miserably, begging for relief. Will ignored it.

“I’m sorry.” He said shortly, his face hot. He could feel the weight of Hannibal’s gaze upon him, watching him. “I didn’t mean to do that.”

“There’s no need to apologize.” Hannibal answered serenely.

“You don’t think so?” Will snapped sarcastically.

“Not at all. You’re apologizing because you’re embarrassed. You’re embarrassed because you believe what you did was inappropriate and unwanted and that I am offended by it.” Hannibal told him. “Which, I assure you, I’m not. Quite the opposite, if fact.”

Will felt Hannibal’s hand lightly touch his shoulder, and he jerked away. “I’m not embarrassed.” He lied. “I just don’t want to encourage you.”

Hannibal chuckled quietly behind him. “My dear, there is nothing you could ever say or do that would discourage me from pursuing you.”

“Good to know.” Will said bitterly as he stood, keeping his back to Hannibal so he wouldn’t see the hopeful tenting of his pants. “I’m taking a shower.”

“Of course, Will.” Hannibal said cheerfully. “But before you go, may I ask who you were thinking of just now?”

Will slammed the bathroom door shut behind him in response.

—-------

Will was exhausted by the time he pulled up to the house, his eyes burning and his feet aching from the long hours he had spent behind the bar, but he was happy to be home. He shut off the engine and climbed down from the truck, eager for sleep, eager for the next few days off, even eager to see Hannibal, despite how embarrassed and angry he had been with him when he had left earlier that afternoon.

Because as much as Will hated to admit it, he had missed him. He always missed Hannibal. He hated being away from him. Was lonely without him. Looked forward to coming back to him each night after work. Just the thought of seeing him again now had Will's heart fluttering, though it took him a long while to realize just why exactly that was...

It took him even longer to realize there wasn't a single light on in the house.

Will stared up at the darkened windows with a frown, not quite believing what he was seeing, and felt his heart stutter dejectedly back to its normal rhythm the longer he looked, until he couldn't deny it any more - Hannibal wasn't waiting for him. He had already gone to bed without him. He didn't want to see him. Will blamed his fatigue for the tears that sprang to his eyes at the thought, but he was quick to swallow them back down, disgusted with himself, as he crossed the yard and slipped quietly through the front door.

It was even darker inside than it had appeared to be from the outside. For several long minutes, Will stood shifting from one foot to the other, paralyzed with indecision as he gazed down the impossibly long hallway at Hannibal's shut door, debating what to do. He was far too proud to beg Hannibal to let him sleep with him, but he was far too terrified to march himself up to his own room and spend the night alone. Will bit his lip, thinking.

In the end, it really wasn't much of a choice at all.

As he crept soundlessly up the stairs, Will thought he saw the shadows stir ahead of him, the shape uncomfortably familiar, and he bolted to his room before he could get a better look and

know for sure. He switched on the light, blinking in the sudden brightness, and wearily pulled off his clothes before collapsing on the bed, fingers burrowing under his pillow for the hunting knife he kept there. It was only when he felt the cold metal of the blade that Will allowed himself to relax, however slightly, and was pleasantly surprised to find himself beginning to drift off...

And then something screamed from somewhere out in the marsh, and Will was instantly awake again. He sighed.

It was gonna be a long night.

—-------

Will watched the approaching dawn with burning eyes and decided he never wanted to see another sunrise for as long as he lived.

He had barely slept the night before, managing maybe only an hour at the most before he finally gave up. He spent the rest of the night listening to that eerie laughter as it echoed through the house, wishing for blissful unawareness as the pounding in his head grew steadily worse and his empty stomach continued to growl, louder and louder as the hours wore on. Now that it was daylight, Will had every intention of spending the rest of the morning asleep…but he knew there was no point in even trying until he got some food in his belly and some aspirin for his head.

He stood, nearly tripping over the toolbox he had commandeered from Hannibal as he did, and stole from his room into the hall.

As he was coming down the stairs, Will heard the unmistakable sound of Hannibal in the kitchen, preparing breakfast, and it brought him to a sudden stop.

He couldn’t face Hannibal. Not yet, not now, not after everything that happened yesterday...but he couldn’t spend even one more minute in his room, just waiting for

something to happen. So he hurried down the stairs and snuck soundlessly into the sitting room, determined to wait there until Hannibal had finished up.

He was shocked to see the state it was in - the couch was in disarray, its pillows shoved aside and a blanket draped over the cushions. It looked like someone had slept there. A file folder (the same one he had seen Hannibal holding the first night he'd come back from the bar) was on the floor, its contents scattered everywhere. As Will looked around the room, he felt the pendulum begin to swing…

It was always disturbing to profile Hannibal as the Ripper.

It was almost even worse to profile him as a man.

Hannibal had come down here last night to wait for him, the same as he had every night. But he had been tired, so tired he could barely keep his eyes open, too tired to read, and as the night wore on, he had found it harder and harder to stay awake.

'Just a few minutes.' He had told himself, turning off the light and easing himself down onto the couch. 'Just a few minutes before Will gets back…'

But it was more than just a few minutes. He slept there all night long, hadn't even heard Will when he came in, and when he did wake with the sun and realized what had happened, he had gone straight for the kitchen, determined to apologize by fixing Will a feast…

Will shook his head and opened his eyes, looking around the empty, messy room once more, the stack of papers spilled across the floor. Curious, he dropped to his knees and began to gather them up, wondering what they were, what Hannibal was up to. When he grabbed the nearest one and flipped it over, he nearly dropped it again.

POLICE REPORT.

Will stared down at the words for a long moment, and then glanced back toward the open door, wondering how long he had before Hannibal came back - he could still hear him moving around in the kitchen...he probably had enough time to read a few pages…

Sinking down onto the couch, Will began to scan the report. His eyes widened when he read the date it had been taken - July 21st, 1981.

It was a date he knew all too well, one he tried not to think about too often, and seeing it now gave him pause. Was it…?

No. He told himself. No, it was just a coincidence. He forced himself to continue, reading further down, down past the date, down to the city it had been filed...

New Orleans Police Department.

Address of Incident...

Will began to shake.

No.

No.

No!

…Yes. It was all there, right in front of him, impossible to deny, printed in blatant black and white. Will felt his breathing hitch, the words blurring on the page as tears filled his eyes, too blurry to read.

Not that it mattered - Will had seen these reports before. He knew every word by heart.

‘...At 1906 hour, dispatch received call reporting injured child. Police arrived at approx 1914 hour…child, 2 year old male, had been drowned in bathtub by mother…father managed to revive child…child was conscious and breathing when police and ambulance arrived on scene…child was taken to hospital at recommendation of paramedics…mother was taken into police custody…’

Will set the report aside with trembling hands and replaced it with another.

‘Wellness Check…child doing well following incident…doctors concerned about possible brain damage, but no significant or permanent physical injury evident…mother currently undergoing psychiatric evaluation…’

And another.

“Missing Persons Report…February 4th, 1982…Caroline Graham…Last seen in Community Care Psychiatric Hospital at 2100 hours, lights out..NOTE: subject previously diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia…erratic behavior, considered dangerous…’

Will couldn’t read any more. He let the pages fall from his hands, the tears spilling from his eyes and down his cheeks.

He couldn’t decide if it was a blessing or a curse that he was too young to remember what had happened that night - the night his father came home early and found his mother holding him down under his bathwater. Everything he knew was from what someone else had told him - how his daddy had shoved his mama away and yanked his limp body out of the tub while his mama screeched nonsense and hysterics behind him. How the screaming had alerted the neighbors, and one of them called the police. How his daddy had pounded his chest, breathed life back into his lungs, and when Will finally drew air on his own, he had cried even harder than the day he was born.

He had almost died that day and he couldn’t even remember it. He never saw his mama again after that and it didn’t even matter because he couldn’t remember her at all.

Everything Will knew about that came from the police reports he'd read after he'd joined the force, the charts he'd requested from the mental hospital. And when he had at last pieced it all together, when he finally understood what had happened, he had been determined to put it behind him. To lock it up so tight inside him and never let it see the light of day again. Overall, he thought he had done a pretty good job.

Until now, of course.

Because it was over. Hannibal had found out - he knew everything now. And there was no way he would ever let it rest. No way he would ever let Will have peace.

"Will?"

Will stiffened, unable to look at Hannibal as he moved slowly into the room.

"Will?" He called again. "What is it, mylimasis? What's wrong?"

Will didn't answer him. From the corner of his eye, he saw Hannibal crouch down, his eyes wandering from Will to the papers scattered at his feet. He sighed.

"Will…"

Will swallowed thickly.

"This was what you were researching, wasn't it?" He croaked. "'Local history', 'the only history that matters' - it was me. My history."

Hannibal hesitated. "Yes."

Will nodded to himself. “Now you know. You know everything, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“And are you happy?” Will whispered.

“Yes.” Hannibal said, reaching for him. Will jerked away.

“Don’t touch me!”

“Will-”

“Don’t.” Will snapped, his throat tight. “Just don’t.”

But of course Hannibal didn’t listen to him. He never did.

He reached out again, stroking Will’s cheek. “I’m not sorry.” He said softly. “I don’t regret what I did and I would do it again if I had to. I’m glad I know. There's nothing for you to be ashamed of, no reason for you to be afraid. No reason you should have hidden this from me - haven’t I told you that there’s nothing that could make me love you any less than I already do?”

Will choked on a sob.

“Why couldn’t you just leave it alone?” He asked, the words strangled. “Why couldn’t you just let me have this one thing for myself?”

“I was curious.” Hannibal explained calmly. “You knew I was.”

Will was gasping now, struggling to draw breath. “And what did it get you?” He managed.

Hannibal cupped his face in his hands. “Understanding.” He said. “I knew New Orleans was painful for you. I just didn’t know why. Now that I do, I can help you.”

“I don’t need your help!”

“I think you do.” Hannibal told him. “It’s obvious you never healed from what happened to you, Will. You’re still hurt.”

“Maybe that’s just fine!” Will snapped. “Maybe I’m fine with things the way they are! Did you ever think of that?”

Hannibal was quiet for a moment, studying him. “It isn’t fine.” He said. “Not when it’s affected you this badly for all these years. This was what you were always so afraid of, wasn’t it? Why you were so terrified you might be crazy. Why you were so convinced it was a possibility.”

“Wouldn’t you be?” Will asked him, knowing full well Hannibal was incapable of such a thing.

Hannibal hummed. “You’re not your mother, Will. You know you’re not.” He pulled Will down from the couch and into his lap, holding him close. “You’re not schizophrenic.” He pointed out, stroking his hair. “You’re not crazy. You don’t hear voices like she did, you don’t see things that aren’t there.”

The dam finally broke. Will wailed into his chest.

“Will?” Hannibal asked. He sounded worried. “What is it?”

But Will couldn't speak. He was crying too hard.

Hannibal began to rock him back and forth, shushing him. "It's okay, Will. Everything's okay, I promise. Deep breaths for me, now, come on…"

"I do!" Will confessed as soon as he could. "I do!"

"You do what?"

"I hear voices!" Will sobbed. "I see things!"

Hannibal went still. "What? For how long?" He demanded.

"Weeks."

"...What is it you see?" Hannibal asked, voice no more than a whisper. "What do you hear?"

"A-Abigail." Will hiccupped. "Beverly. Bedelia. My ma…ghosts. They talk to me, they tell me things. I hear things. I don't even know sometimes what's real and what's not."

Hannibal was quiet for a while, considering. "Why didn't you tell me, Will? I could have helped you."

"You know why!"

Hannibal's grip on him tightened. "I wouldn't have used this against you, Will."

“Yes, you would have.” Will whispered. “And I know you will.”

“I won’t.” Hannibal told him. “I promise.”

Will stayed silent, not trusting himself to speak. Hannibal waited until Will’s breathing had evened out before he squeezed him again.

“It’s going to be okay, Will.”

“No, it’s not.”

“It is.” Hannibal said firmly. “We’re going to figure this out.”

Will was far too tired to point out that there was nothing to figure out and that they had no options - there were no tests they could run, no treatment they could try, no medication he could be prescribed. They were screwed, and there was nothing they could do about it. Nothing at all.

“You’re off work tonight?” Hannibal asked.

Will nodded.

“Hmm.” Hannibal said, rubbing his back. “Why don’t we go out for dinner? Take your mind off things? I’ll take you someone nice - whatever you want. How does that sound?”

“No.” Will groaned.

Hannibal chuckled. “Come on, Will. Who knows - you might enjoy yourself.”

Will doubted he would. But he agreed nonetheless.

—-------

Will didn’t think much of it when Hannibal insisted that he pick out his clothes for the night. But he probably should have guessed what Hannibal had in mind when he laid out Will’s best suit and urged him to put it on. And he definitely should have realized where they were going, should have recognized the route they were taking, even when Hannibal refused to say. But because Will was an idiot, he didn’t make the connection until the moment they had pulled in front of the restaurant.

He stared up at the iconic blue building in shock for several seconds, then turned to glare at Hannibal, who frowned back.

“Something wrong, Will?”

“ *Really* ?” Will snapped. “Commander’s Palace?! What’s wrong with you?!”

“Too many things to go into right now, I’m afraid.” Hannibal said, circling around the car to open Will’s door for him. “Come on, Will. I was lucky to get us a reservation on such short notice. Especially tonight.”

“Why? What’s tonight?” Will asked nervously as Hannibal steered him inside. Hannibal grinned, and Will thought he saw a flicker of the Chesapeake Ripper lurking behind that smile as he leaned over to whisper in his ear.

“It’s a surprise.” He purred, his grin widening when Will shuddered against him.

Will followed closely behind Hannibal as they were led to their table, overwhelmed by the grandeur that surrounded them and feeling unbearably out-of-place. It didn't matter what Hannibal dressed him in, Will wasn't fooling anybody, and he knew it - the calluses on his hands gave him away for what he was, the brutal scars across his face cheapened the effect, and no matter how hard he pretended otherwise, no matter how badly Hannibal wished otherwise, there was nothing, *nothing* , that would ever change what Will was - poor, unrefined, working-class, white trash.

Will kept his head down as he sank into his seat, sneaking glances around the room. He was surprised to see a large space had been cleared in the middle of the hall, where several couples stood wrapped in one another's arms, swaying gently to accompanying music. Will craned his neck, trying to see where it was coming from, and spied a piano shoved off to the side. A young woman sat at the bench, and as he watched her, she bent closer to the microphone that had been set in front of her.

" *The world was on fire, no one could save me, but you. It's strange what desire will make foolish people do. I never dreamed that I'd meet somebody like you* -"

"How apropos." Hannibal murmured quietly beside him.

"Seriously though." Will said, turning to him. "What's going on?"

"From what I understand, the Commander's Palace occasionally provides live music for its patrons." Hannibal explained. "Tonight is one such time."

"You're not going to make me dance with you, are you?"

"My dear, I doubt there's anyone on this earth who could make you do something you didn't want to do."

'Not that we can ever know for sure, can we?' Thought Will bitterly as the waiter appeared at Hannibal's elbow with the wine list. Given the nature of Will's condition, it could be very

easy to influence him if you knew what you were doing. Hannibal certainly had, and so had Jack, to an extent. Just how many of Will's decisions were truly his and not someone else's? Will honestly didn't know. And he doubted he ever would.

Hannibal waited until their drinks came before he addressed Will again. "There's something I'd like to discuss with you, Will." He said, taking a sip of his wine. Will stiffened at his tone.

"What about?"

"I would like for us to talk about your mother."

"Why?" Will snapped, bristling. "Don't you already know everything you need to know about her?"

"Not everything." Hannibal said with an easy shrug. "And even if I did, I think it would be therapeutic for you to talk about her."

"And you really think *this* is the best place to be doing that?" Will drawled, gesturing around the restaurant.

"Admittedly, it's not ideal." Hannibal agreed. "But it's better than the house, where you could storm off as soon as it became too difficult for you."

"And I'm sure it has nothing to do with the fact that I'm more likely to behave myself while we're in public, right?"

Hannibal grinned at him, showing his teeth. "Not at all." He said. "Do whatever you like - I won't stop you."

Will knew he meant it, too. Will could stand on the table and scream at the top of his lungs, could murder everyone in the place or burn it to the fucking ground, and Hannibal would sit back and watch as if it were a mildly interesting television program.

“Fine.” He growled, taking a quick sip of his whiskey to steel himself. “What do you want to know?”

Hannibal didn’t answer him right away. He seemed to be considering how best to proceed, which answers he desired most. In the end, he began cautiously. “Your mother was a paranoid schizophrenic?”

“You’re really going to ask something you already know?”

“Police reports are public records, Will, but patient charts are much more difficult to attain.” Hannibal reminded him. “It would be remiss of me to base my entire understanding of what happened on the word of a police officer and not the dedicated notes of a medical professional.”

“And you think I had access to her hospital records?”

“I know you did.” Hannibal said. “So tell me, Will - was the report correct? Your mother was schizophrenic?”

“Yes.”

“And the night she tried to drown you - was that the first time she had shown any signs of mental illness?”

“There were other signs before then.” Will told him. “My father just didn’t know what they were.”

Hannibal nodded. “She heard voices? Your mother?”

“Yes.”

“And these voices told her to do things?”

“Yes.”

“Like what?”

“Like kill me.”

“Did they say why?”

Will hesitated. “They told her,” He explained. “That I was evil...and if she didn’t destroy me...I would murder the world.”

Though Hannibal’s face remained expressionless, Will could tell the words delighted him. “I see. And after your mother was diagnosed, what happened to her?”

“The city filed charges against her for attempted murder.” Will said. “Obviously, she was found not guilty by reason of insanity, so she wasn’t sentenced to prison.”

“But she was committed, wasn’t she?”

Will snorted mirthlessly. “Can’t have someone like that running around unsupervised. Not when they’re a danger to themselves and others.”

“No. You cannot.” Hannibal agreed. He paused again, thinking. “So your mother was then sent to a psychiatric hospital. Was it a good one?”

“No.” Will said, shaking his head. “We were poor, we couldn’t...we couldn’t afford to get her into one of the better facilities. She ended up in a state institution.”

“Not well known for their quality of care, state institutions.” Hannibal stated. “Under-funded, under-staffed...it was while she was under their care that your mother disappeared, is that right?”

“Yes.”

“After only...six months?”

“Something like that, yeah.”

“And while you were still just a baby.” Hannibal mused. “Old enough to know what she did to you and no doubt wonder where she was. Did you ever ask for your mother, Will? Cry for her at night? Or were you afraid of her?”

“I-I don’t know. My father never talked about it.”

“No, I expect not. Did he feel guilty about what happened?”

“I think so.”

“How could he not?” Hannibal said. “He failed to recognize his wife was ill. Almost lost his son because of his negligence. And had to commit his wife to third rate care because he couldn’t afford better.”

“Stop.” Will begged him.

“That was not the first time the state hospital lost a patient was it? There were other cases of patients escaping?”

“Yes, there were...flaws in their security system.”

“But your mother was the first one they couldn’t find?”

“Yes.”

“And what happened the night she disappeared, Will?”

“Nothing. The doctors said she had been quiet all day. It was noted in her chart that she took her meds that night and that she was last seen in her bed at lights out. She was gone the next morning.”

“And there was nothing on the security footage?”

“There wasn’t any security footage at all.”

“I presume the hospital staff searched the premises themselves first. And when they couldn’t find her, that’s when they called in the police?”

“Yes.”

“But the police couldn’t find her either.” Hannibal surmised.

“No.” Will whispered. “We never found her. It was like she just vanished into thin air.”

Hannibal blinked his red eyes slowly, savoring. “But you tried to find her, didn’t you, Will? After you became a cop?”

“Yeah, I tried.”

“But you couldn’t.”

“Isn’t that what I just said?”

“But you must have had your own theories about what happened to her.” Hannibal said, ignoring him. “Police training aside, you would have been able to assume her twisted point of view, what she was thinking. You could have understood what she was trying to do, where she was trying to go.”

“Nothing I can prove.” Will reminded him, buying for time.

“I’m not concerned with what we can and cannot prove, Will. I’m only interested in what you think happened.”

Will swallowed hard.

“...The mental hospital was a few blocks from the Mississippi River.” He managed. “The police didn't think she could have made it that far, but...” He trailed off, took a deep breath, and then continued woodenly. “It’s the only thing that makes sense.”

He risked a glance at Hannibal. His expression betrayed nothing, as he studied Will thoughtfully.

“Do you wish you had the chance to know your mother, Will?” He asked, and the gentle way he spoke made Will snarl.

“Does it really matter?” He spat. “It’s not like knowing her would have made it any better! It wouldn’t change what she did to me!”

“But she was still your mother, Will.” Hannibal said quietly. “She was still a part of you. Just as you’re a part of her.”

Will flinched as if he had been slapped, and sat still for several long minutes, breathing deep, slow, rattling breaths. Hannibal waited patiently.

“I’m going to go to the bathroom.” Will said at last, rising abruptly to his feet. Hannibal blinked, looking faintly disappointed, but he didn’t try to stop Will when he turned and fairly bolted from the room.

The men’s room was miraculously empty when Will stumbled inside, and he spent several long minutes hunched over one of the sinks, pulling shallow air into his shaking lungs and willing himself not to fall apart while the world tilted lazily around him. Eventually, when the roaring in his ears faded and Will felt like he could finally draw a breath, he straightened, lifting his head to gaze at his reflection in the mirror.

Will studied his face, the large blue eyes, the dark curls, the shredded, porcelain skin, the broken mind underneath it all, and wished that everything was different.

Hannibal was not at the table when Will got back.

For a few terrible, heart-stopping moments, Will feared the absolute worst, looking wildly around the room, wondering where Hannibal was, what had happened while he was gone, what he was *doing* , when he spotted Hannibal over by the piano, speaking with the singer. His horror only grew when he saw the woman nod at whatever it was he was saying, smiling widely as he finally turned away and made his way back to the table.

“Hello, dear. Back already?”

“What are you doing?” Will snapped at him in response.

“Putting in a request.” Hannibal said simply. “Any chance I could persuade you to dance with me?”

“No chance in hell.”

Hannibal sighed mournfully. “I thought I’d try. Please, sit.”

Will did so, stiffly, on the edge of his seat. He looked from Hannibal to the singer and back again, his heart pounding. Hannibal chuckled.

“Really, Will. What do you think is going to happen?”

“Knowing you, I’m afraid to find out.”

“Prepare to be disappointed, then.” Hannibal said quietly as the singer began to play.

“*You’re my world, you’re night and day.”* She crooned. *“You’re my world, you’re every breath I take. Other eyes see the stars up in the skies, but for me, they shine within your eyes-*”

Hannibal was watching Will, waiting for his reaction. Will rolled his eyes.

“You’re such a sap.” He muttered, shaking his head. “Honestly, you’re embarrassing to be around.”

Hannibal smirked. He leaned forward, closer to Will, and Will, much to his surprise, found himself reciprocating, drawn to him by a force he couldn’t refuse.

“If I am,” Hannibal said. “It’s because you make me so. You have no idea the power you have over me. What I would do for you.”

“Please.” Will muttered. “If it weren’t for my empathy, you wouldn’t even look at me.”

“And why is that such a bad thing, Will?”

Will scoffed. “You’re kidding right?”

“It’s not wrong to love a person for their qualities, Will. It’s true you’re more than just your empathy disorder, but it’s an important part of what makes you who you are.” Will must have looked unconvinced, because Hannibal continued. “You had feelings for Alana at one time, didn’t you?”

Will shifted uncomfortably. “I think so.”

“Why? What did you like about her?”

“Her compassion, for starters.” Will said, hoping Hannibal would appreciate the dig for exactly what it was.

“What about her intelligence? Her beauty?”

“Yes.”

“If Alana lacked compassion, if she was cruel or ugly or stupid, would you still have desired her?”

“Probably not.” Will admitted, somewhat reluctantly.

“Of course not - she would not be the same person.” Hannibal concluded. “Just as you wouldn’t be who you are without your empathy.”

Will didn’t answer him right away.

(“ *With your hand resting in mine, I feel a power so divine, you’re my world, you are my night and day…”).*

“Does it ever...bother you?” Will asked eventually.

“Does what bother me?”

“Me. The way I am. Being stuck with me.” Will muttered, avoiding his eyes. “You always say I’m the only person in the world who could understand you, and I’m, well…” He gestured vaguely at himself, the luxury around then. “Surely, I’m the last thing you ever imagined for a...a companion. Don’t you ever wish I was more...like what you wanted?”

Hannibal was quiet for a moment. “I never imagined I’d have anybody, Will.” He said eventually, his hand moving tentatively closer to Will’s. “So no, I don’t regret you or anything about you - you’re so much more than anything I ever could have hoped for.”

Will snorted and looked away, embarrassed. “Liar.” He mumbled. “I know for a fact you wish I was a lot more homicidal. Like you.”

“Perhaps.” Hannibal said, and Will could hear the smile in his voice as he took his hand. “But I’ve been told we can’t always get what we want.”

“Like that would stop you from trying.” Will muttered, and Hannibal laughed, leaning even closer, impossibly closer, to him.

(“ *If our love ceases to be, then it’s the end of my world for me-”)*

“I’m simply trying to help you realize your potential, Will.” He said. “Isn't that what lovers are supposed to do - bring out the best in one another?”

“Is that what we are?” Will asked, a little breathlessly. “Lovers?”

“I think we’re so much more than that, Will.” Hannibal murmured. “What we are - there’s not a word that exists for it.”

(“ *You’re my world, you’re every prayer I pray. If our love ceases to be-”*).

He was so close now. Their noses were touching, rubbing gently against one another. Will could feel Hannibal’s warm breath puff against his skin, and his eyes slipped shut as Hannibal’s lips brushed his…

“Uh-hmm.”

Will opened his eyes at the soft little cough, confused, and looked over to find that their waiter had returned, his white-gloved fist near his frowning, disapproving mouth.

“Gentlemen, I’m afraid I must ask you to refrain from…that.” He said primly. “That’s not the sort of thing we tolerate at this establishment.”

Will stared at him incredulously. “What are you talking about?” He asked. “I’ve seen half a dozen couples kissing since we’ve arrived. Look, there’s one over there doing it right now!” He said, pointing to the man and woman just a few tables away.

“That’s a different issue, Sir.”

“Different how?” Will demanded. “If they’re allowed to kiss, why aren’t-”

And then it hit him.

Will fell silent, numb shock quickly giving way to dull and burning shame. He wanted nothing more than to sink into the floor, to flee from the judgment and disgust that was pouring over him, and he glanced over at Hannibal, looking for reassurance, for solidarity...

He really, really shouldn’t have.

The moment he saw the look on Hannibal’s face, the shame was instantly cast aside, forgotten, leaving nothing but all-consuming horror in its wake. Because the look on Hannibal’s face was fire and ice fury, promising death. If Will had thought he saw a shadow of the Ripper stir before at just the thought of torturing him, he stood before him now in all his glory, hungry for blood. Will stared at him, wide-eyed, not daring to move as Hannibal slowly pulled away, his reptilian gaze fixed upon the waiter.

“I apologize.” He said after a slight pause. Will thought he saw his eyes flicker to the waiter’s name tag, but the motion was too quick for him to be completely sure. “I hadn’t realized the Commander’s Palace was so…conservative in its way of thinking.”

“It’s nothing personal, of course.” The waiter was quick to reassure him. He seemed relieved that Hannibal was being so reasonable, that he was cooperating so easily. If only he knew.

“It’s simply a matter of propriety. We just believe that there is a time and a place for…for people like you.”

Will nearly threw up. Not only at those words but also the bloodbath they promised.

Hannibal smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. He seemed decidedly unimpressed. “Terrible times we live in, when everything once considered sacred is so openly desecrated. ‘Tolerance and apathy are, after all, the last virtues of a dying society’.”

“Precisely.” The waiter said in that patronizing tone. Will wondered how often a man had looked his death directly in the face and had unknowingly insulted it. “Now, have you decided what you would like, or do you need a few more minutes?”

“No, I think we’re ready.” Hannibal said crisply. “I’ll-”

“No.”

Both Hannibal and the waiter turned to look at Will.

“I beg your pardon, sir?”

“Yes, Will, what was that?”

“I said no!” Will said, perhaps a bit more loudly than he had intended. A few people looked over at him disapprovingly. “No! I’m not eating somewhere so fucking backwards and intolerant as this! I’m going!”

“Now, Will.” Hannibal said, voice low, a warning. “We are guests here. And as guests, we need to respect-”

“I’m not respecting discrimination!” Will hissed, pushing himself to his feet. Most of the restaurant was staring openly at him now. “Are you coming or not?”

Hannibal glared at him. For a terrifying split second, Will thought that he would call his bluff and refuse, but the waiter forced his hand.

“I’m going to have to ask you both to leave.” He said imperiously, evidently pleased to have an excuse to kick them out. “You’re causing a disturbance and making everyone here very uncomfortable.”

A moment passed, and then Hannibal rose slowly from the table, his dead, emotionless eyes locked on Will, who glowered back before turning abruptly on his heel and marching out, breathing a small sigh of relief when he heard the quick step of Hannibal’s Italian leather shoes behind him.

They didn’t speak again until they were in the car.

“Take me home.” WIll snarled, slamming his door shut. “Now.”

“Will-“

“NOW, Hannibal!”

He was amazed when Hannibal started the car without comment.

It didn’t last long.

“That man had no right speaking to you that way.” He said as they pulled away.

“You’re right, he didn’t. That’s why I left.”

“Forgive me if I don’t agree that is the best way to handle it.”

“So write a bad Yelp review and be done with it!” Will screamed at him. “You don’t have to murder the guy!”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s not worth it!”

“I think it is.”

Will turned to him fuming. “You really love me?”

“More than anything.”

“Then prove it.” Will challenged him. “Leave it alone. For me.”

Hannibal didn’t say another word the entire drive back.

Night had fallen heavily by the time they reached the house, the stars hidden under a dense cover of clouds that dotted the black sky. Hannibal’s quiet calm was like the calm before a storm, and Will watched him warily as he unlocked the front door, holding it open for Will.

“After you, darling.”

Will hesitated for a brief moment before he stepped cautiously across the threshold, glancing back at Hannibal over his shoulder as he followed him inside and locked the door firmly behind them. He frowned when he caught sight of the look on Will’s face.

“My dear, how grave you are.” He murmured, reached out for Will, who took a small step back.

“What are you going to do now?” He asked.

“Making dinner seems like a good place to start.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“No?” Hannibal asked lightly. Far too lightly. “Are you sure? I’ll make you whatever you want, Will.”

“No thank you. I’m fine.” Will said.

“Are you going to bed?” Hannibal asked him, moving toward the kitchen. “Or will you read for a bit?”

“I think I’ll go to bed.” Will said, trailing after him. “I didn’t get much sleep last night.”

Hannibal made a vague noise of sympathy as he pulled a package of meat from the refrigerator. “Poor boy. You must be exhausted.”

“More than you can imagine.” Will said, turning away as Hannibal began unwrapping the butcher paper. “Good night.”

“You’re going to sleep alone tonight?”

Will froze, terrified of the way he said it, the implication left unsaid.

“I just thought that’s what you would prefer.” He said.

“Nonsense.” Hannibal briskly, coming around the counter and taking Will by the shoulders. “I much prefer you with me.”

His grip was a little too firm as he began to lead Will toward his room…

“Why don’t I fix you a cup of tea?” Hannibal asked then, his voice smoke and serpents, whispering seductively. “Something that will help you sleep?”

Will pulled away. “No.” He said, fighting to keep his voice level. “I think it would be best if I spent the night alone.”

The silence that answered seemed to last forever.

“If that’s what you want.” Hannibal said eventually, releasing Will from his hold. “I won’t stop you.”

Will had to force himself not to move too quickly away from him. “Good night.” He mumbled, heading for the stairs.

“Good night.”

Will felt strangely calm, almost detached from himself, as his feet carried him up to his room. He could hear the slow and gentle thump of blood pulsing in his ears, felt his ribs shift, making room for his expanding lungs. Even his thoughts were unusually subdued as he ascended the last step and pushed his door open. That was fine. He didn't need to think too much about what was going to happen next. He knew what he needed to do. If he was going to stop Hannibal, he didn't need to overthink it. He just needed to act.

The toolbox had been in Will's room for weeks now. Hannibal had no use for it, had no interest in it, so Will had taken it for himself. He dragged it out from under his bed and opened it with steady fingers, digging through the chrome, setting things aside, until he found the little flashlight at the bottom. He grabbed it and shoved it into his pocket and then quickly left the room again.

"Will?" Hannibal called out as he was coming back down the stairs. "Are you alright? Did you change your mind?"

"I think I left my phone in your car." Will shouted back. "Would you mind unlocking it for me?"

"Not at all, my love."

The porch light was the only light for miles, and without it, it would have been impossibly dark outside, too dark to navigate even the few feet that separated Will from the car. Will didn't waste any time, dashing across the lawn by the soft, electric glow of that single bulb, knowing he had to be quick, knowing that he only had one shot and he couldn't afford to mess it up.

He popped the hood and stuck the little flashlight between his teeth, shining it over the various wires and tubes inside.

He found the engine fuse box and examined it for a minute before he found the one he wanted and pulled it free. Then he closed the hood and slipped both the flashlight and the stolen fuse into his pocket.

Hannibal was waiting for him inside.

“Did you find your phone?” He asked.

“Yeah, it was under my seat.” Will told him. “Must have fallen out of my pocket.”

“Hmm.” Hannibal hummed. “I’m glad you found it.” He paused, studying Will. There was something about the way he was looking at him, that calculating stare, that made Will want to put as much distance between them as possible. “Are you sure you want to be alone tonight?”

“Yes, I’m sure.”

“Very well. Goodnight, mylimasis.”

“Night.” Will said again, slipping past him. He could feel Hannibal’s eyes following him up the stairs, and he resisted the urge to touch the fuse and reassure himself that it was still there in his pocket.

When he reached his room, Will locked the door, despite knowing that it was pointless, that Hannibal still had the master key and even if he didn’t, he would find a way to get in if he wanted to. And Will had a feeling he would want to, once he realized what Will had done.

Will was curled unmoving on his bed, ears pricked and straining, hardly daring to breathe as he lay listening, waiting, the night hanging heavy overhead.

It had been hours since he'd said goodnight to Hannibal, hours since he heard a single sound from downstairs...but he knew Hannibal was still awake, knew it in a way he couldn't possibly explain, that somewhere down in the cold, empty darkness, Hannibal was waiting…

…Waiting…

…Waiting…

…Waiting for just the right moment to finally make his move.

And when he did, he would know immediately what Will had done.

And once he knew, Will doubted he would live to see the sunrise.

Will sighed, burying his face in his sheets to muffle the sound and fingering the hunting knife under his pillow. He almost wished that something would happen, if only just to get it over with. He wasn't afraid of dying - Hannibal's wrath was so much worse - it was the waiting he couldn't stand, the knowledge that everything was about to come to an end in the worst way possible and there was nothing he could do but let it unfold and implode.

Will must have drifted off at some point, because the next thing he knew, he was blinking up at the darkness around him, thoughts fuzzy, trying to figure out what was going on, what had woken him...

A moment later, he was wide-awake. Because downstairs, something in the air had shifted, and Will went so still that even his heart paused for a beat, trying to hear…

And then he heard it, so faint he almost missed it - footsteps. Someone was creeping down the hall.

‘This is it.’ Will thought, his heart seizing, his stomach twisting painfully. 'This is where we finally come to an end.’

He didn’t move as Hannibal quietly opened the front door and crossed the yard, but he couldn’t help but flinch when he heard the car door open and then shut.

A moment passed - a moment of truth.

And then Will heard the engine try to turn over, sputter, fail.

A pause.

Again.

Another pause. Longer this time.

Hannibal tried one more time…

And then nothing. The silence seemed to stretch for hours as Will lay waiting, listening, barely breathing...

Will thought it was strange that he felt no surge of adrenaline when he heard the car door open and close again. He marveled that his heart rate began to slow when he heard Hannibal come back inside. Was *relieved* to hear him coming up the stairs…

Because Hannibal was only ever predictable when he was violent, after all. And Will knew that Hannibal could forgive Will for a lot of things, for almost anything...but he doubted he could forgive him for denying him the chance to right a wrong.

Hannibal wasn't even trying to be quiet anymore. He was on the stairs, his footsteps announcing his approach as he climbed higher and closer to Will, who at long last finally moved, sliding silently off the bed and to his feet, staring at his locked door, hunting knife in hand. He stood tall, calm. He knew he couldn't beat Hannibal. Knew Hannibal would more than likely make him suffer before he finally killed him. He knew that this was it - Will was going to die tonight.

But he wouldn't die without a fight.

Hannibal had reached his room. Will could hear him breathing outside his door, could see his shadow, just barely, under the crack. It didn't move, but remained eerily still, and that somehow made it worse. Will waited, holding his breath, as the door knob slowly began to turn...

And then, just as suddenly as it started, it stopped.

Will blinked, frowning, watching Hannibal's shadow as it shifted...and then slowly backed away from view, his footsteps retreating back down the stairs.

Will slowly released the breath he had been holding, still staring at his door.

What had just happened?

Will spent the rest of the night waiting. Waiting for Hannibal to come back, waiting for something to happen.

But nothing did.

Hannibal never came back.

The silence stretched on. The quiet continued undisturbed. Eventually, the night was swallowed under the horizon. And all the while, Will sat stiff with cold on his bedroom floor, eyes never straying from the door. When he finally heard the distant sound of Hannibal's bedroom door opening downstairs, he went rigid, straining to try and discern what he was doing.

He tracked Hannibal by sound as he went into the kitchen and began to prepare breakfast. Listened as he gathered everything he needed together- the metal pans, the mixing bowls, the different ingredients from the pantry and refrigerator - and began to crack, scrape, whisk it into something new. It was only once it stopped, and he heard Hannibal's cat-like footfalls disappear back into his room, that Will stood and snuck quietly from his room and quickly down the stairs.

The kitchen was empty when Will came in, but the table was piled high with food. Will edged closer, eyeing it warily. Two plates had been set beside one another, the napkins folded into champagne colored roses. Between the plates was a French press filled with coffee, its perfume sharp in the cold morning air. Dishes piled high with eggs, bacon, slices of artisan bread, fresh cuts of fruit, a bowl of yogurt, honey, jams of every flavor, rich butter, a sugar bowl…

Will looked at the spread and couldn't help but think of candied houses and forbidden fruit.

He was so absorbed by the sight, so preoccupied with trying to figure out what Hannibal was doing, that he didn't even hear him approach.

It was only when he felt the faint puff of air on his neck that Will gasped and spun around.

Hannibal grabbed him and shoved him up against the wall.

Will gasped again, and looked up at Hannibal, terrified, as he bent forward and pressed his forehead against Will's.

"Remarkable boy." Hannibal sighed, his eyes slipping shut. "Remarkable, cunning, *exquisite* boy."

Will panted as Hannibal inhaled his scent, and then slowly pulled away, his red eyes blinking open once again.

"Are you hungry?"

Will was so taken aback by the question that for several seconds he didn't answer. Hannibal cocked an eyebrow, concerned, and Will slowly shook his head.

"No?" Hannibal asked with a frown. "You haven't eaten anything since yesterday afternoon, Will."

Will shook his head again, more forcefully this time, but Hannibal ignored him, pulling him toward the table.

"I insist." He said, forcing Will into his seat.

Will was rigid where he sat, his every muscle taut, jaw clenched so tightly he could hear it creaking as he watched Hannibal take his plate, loading it with food.

"Everything all right, Will?"

"F-fine." Will croaked.

“You look tired.” Hannibal informed him, setting his now laden plate back in front of him. “Did you get any sleep last night?”

“Not really.”

“Oh? That’s a shame. I wish you would have come down and told me - I could have helped you.”

“Yeah, I bet you could have.” Will said, eyeing his food distrustfully.

“Eat, Will.”

Will spared him a quick half-glance, refusing to meet his eyes, before he looked away again, back at the food. He was sure Hannibal had done something to it, but what, exactly, he didn’t know.

“I’m not hungry.”

“Don’t lie, Will.” Hannibal scolded. “It won’t help you.” When Will still refused to move, he leaned forward. “Should I go and get the feeding tube?”

Will looked over at him sharply, and met Hannibal’s cold, unrelenting gaze. He wondered if it was better to die by knowingly swallowing poison or be force-fed it, and decided it didn’t matter - either way he lost. Will scooped some eggs into his fork and slowly raised it to his trembling lips, Hannibal watching, unblinking, the entire time. It was only after he had swallowed that Hannibal smiled.

“Good boy.” He said, turning back to his own meal. “And, Will, dear, when you’re finished, would you be so kind as to replace the fuse you took last night? As charming as I find your efforts, I really need it back.”

Chapter End Notes

If you haven't heard them, check out Anya Taylor-Joy's rendition of "You're My World" from "Last Night in Soho" and Daisy Gray's "Wicked Game". They sound suspiciously like the versions from this chapter...

Also, I know it's quick - but the police report talking about the doctors being worried about Will having oxygen deprivation and brain damage from what happened to him - it's my explanation for Will's empathy disorder.

I'm not entirely happy with how this chapter turned out. I might go back and edit it later. It depends how much time I have.

Thanks for reading! I hope you enjoyed it!

Each Time That I Think You Go, I Turn Around And You're Creeping In

Chapter Summary

It was a dark and stormy night...

Hannibal set two tablets on the table beside Will's plate.

"What's that?" Will asked, lowering his coffee and eyeing the little white pills suspiciously.

"Something to help with hallucinations." Hannibal said lightly, sitting down beside him. He steepled his hands, watching Will over his fingertips. "I would like for you to take them, Will."

"Yeah? Well, I'd like to not be on the run from the FBI and for my only friend to be normal instead of a psychopathic serial killer." Will snapped. "But that's not gonna happen, is it?"

"The FBI has officially declared us dead, Will." Hannibal reminded him patiently. "We don't have to worry about them anymore. And as for me being normal," He smirked. "I think we both know that's not something you really want."

"Whatever. I'm still not taking them."

Hannibal considered him. "Are you still having hallucinations?"

Will took another sip of his coffee. "Yes." He admitted reluctantly, avoiding Hannibal's eyes.

“When was the last time you had one?”

Will thought about the night before, of lying beside Hannibal in the dark and listening to that sweet, songlike voice echo through the house and wishing it would stop. “I don’t know. A couple days ago.” He lied.

“I think it would be worth trying, Will.” Hannibal said gently, reaching out and taking Will’s hand in his.

“It’s not gonna work, Hannibal.”

“How do you know?” Hannibal pressed him. “How do you know it won’t? What if it does? What if all you have to do to make them stop is take a couple pills?” His thumb began to move back and forth across Will’s knuckles. “I hate seeing you suffer, Will.” He said. “Please, just try them. If it doesn't work, I won’t ask you to take them again.”

Will hesitated, and then slowly pulled his hand free from Hannibal’s. He picked up one of the pills, studying the smooth white surface. “What is it?”

“It’s Haloperidol.” Hannibal told him. “It’s used to treat a number of conditions, but primarily-”

“I know what it’s used for.” Will interrupted impatiently. “I was Chilton’s special lab rat for months, remember? Between being injected with experimental drugs and having the orderlies shove horse tranquilizers down my throat, I actually managed to learn a few things about antipsychotics, you know.”

There was a brief flash of anger across Hannibal’s face, a faint ripple of emotion from some far-off source that vanished just as suddenly as it appeared. “I’m sorry that happened to you, Will.”

“You should be. It’s your fault.” Will set the pill back down. “It doesn’t look like Haloperidol.” He said, remembering the green-tinted pills Chilton had given him.

Hannibal rose from the table and went quickly to his bedroom, returning only a few moments later with his Gladstone bag. “There are several different versions of the drug.” He explained, pulling a few orange, plastic prescription bottles from the bag and checking their labels. “The hospital must use a different supplier than my pharmacy.” He found the bottle he had been looking for and handed it to Will. “I promise I’m not lying to you, Will. Here.”

Will read the label for himself and then unscrewed the cap, looking down at the collection of little round pills inside, identical to the ones on his plate. He hesitated, thinking, and then handed the bottle back to Hannibal.

“Do you believe me now?”

“I believe you.” Will said simply. “I’m still not taking them.”

Hannibal sighed. “Very well.”

So saying, he reached over and took the two pills from Will’s plate, preparing to drop them back in the bottle.

“You’re not going to try and convince me to take them?” Will asked, watching him incredulously. “You’re not going to force me?”

“My dear, there is nothing I want more right now than for you to take these pills.” Hannibal said wistfully. “I’ve told you before that I only want what’s best for you, and I meant it. But to be honest, I don’t know what’s best for you. I don’t know why this is happening to you, or what to do to help you. All I can do is offer you the different medicines I have and hope that one of them works. But I understand if you don’t want to. I haven’t given you much reason to trust me, have I?”

“No, you haven’t.” Will agreed quietly, thinking of the faint half-memories he had of Hannibal’s past treatments - of flashing lights, of needles breaching the surface of his skin, of the ice in his veins, the pain that was never far behind. “I’d be crazy to ever trust you like that again.”

Hannibal’s lips quirked slightly. “You might *be* , mylimasis.” He pointed out.

If he had slapped him, it would have hurt much less. Will jerked in his seat at those words and looked at Hannibal, wide-eyed and lost. “What am I supposed to do?” He whispered, hating that he didn’t know the answer, that he was turning to Hannibal, of all people, for help. Hannibal inclined his head.

“I’m afraid I can’t tell you that, Will.” He said, just as quietly. “No one can. This is something you have to decide for yourself.”

“Why?” Will pushed him. “You had no problem deciding what was best for me before.”

“And you still resent me for it.” Hannibal reminded him. “If I have to spend the rest of my life atoning for that, I will. But I won’t give you any more reasons to hate me.” He sat back in his chair, distancing himself, his influence, from Will. “I’ll help you in any way I can, Will. I’ll respect whatever you choose to do.” He said, pushing back his chair and preparing to get to his feet.

Will’s hand shot out before he could stand, grabbing him, stopping him, and Hannibal’s maroon eyes flickered down, surprised, to the white fingers fisting his shirt. “Will?”

Will swallowed. “I’ll take them.”

“I’m sorry?”

“I’ll take them.” Will repeated, louder this time, keeping his gaze locked firmly on a knot in the wood grain of the kitchen table. “I’ll take the pills.”

Hannibal seemed to hesitate. “Will, are you sure?” He asked. “I’m not forcing you. You don’t have to take them if you don’t want to.”

“I know.” Will assured him, thinking of the laughing woman, her long white dress as she danced between the shadows of his room. He thought of Beverly glaring at him, of Bedelia’s judgmental scowl…Abigail’s soft voice. He was tired of it. Tired of them appearing so suddenly, so unexpectedly, with so little warning. He was tired of them lingering, of the pain they brought him. Tired of the songs and cackles that haunted his sleep. Tired of being tired. “I just want it to stop.”

Hannibal kept his eyes on Will, watching him closely for any sign of doubt, some small hint he might have changed his mind, as he picked up the bottle again and shook two pills into his cupped hand. He held them out to Will, who hesitated before he took them.

“How long do they take to start working?” He asked, staring down at the little tablets lying innocently on his palm.

“No oral medication works immediately. It needs time to be absorbed.” Hannibal told him. “It varies from person to person, but I would estimate it will take about twenty minutes or so before you start to feel its effects.”

Will considered this. “Roofies work immediately.” He pointed out, thinking back to the night of the St. Regis bar, how quickly he was affected then.

“There are exceptions to every rule.” Hannibal agreed. “But this is not rohypnol.”

‘No.’ Will thought. ‘This is something so much worse.’

He wavered for a moment longer, debating what to do, while Hannibal continued to watch him, ready to take the pills back if Will decided he didn’t want them after all, and it was the grim, worried look on Hannibal’s face, the gritty feeling of his own tired eyes that chose for

him. Will quickly threw them back before he lost his resolve, chasing them with a quick swallow of coffee. He gagged at the bitter taste that followed.

"Good." Hannibal murmured, taking his hand again. "Good, Will."

Will shook his head. "I'm not sure if I'll know they're working." He said. "I'm not hallucinating right now."

"That's alright." Hannibal soothed him. "We'll see how you feel after a few minutes. And if you don't feel any different, we can always try again. Okay?"

Will nodded, trying to stifle the panic that was beginning to build in his chest.

What if it didn't work? What was he supposed to do then?

…What if it did?

What if Will really was losing his mind?

Will swallowed, terrified.

What had he just done?

—------—

When Will finally finished his breakfast, Hannibal insisted that he stay inside, despite Will's protests.

“I just want to go for a walk!” He objected. “Like I do every morning!”

“We don’t know how the medicine will affect you.” Hannibal explained calmly. “If you have an adverse reaction to it, I need to be nearby so I can administer something to counter its effects.”

“You can come with me.” Will offered wildly, desperate to leave the house and all its ghosts behind, even for just a little bit.

“I can’t fit everything I might need in my Gladstone bag, Will.” Hannibal said, as he continued to load the dishwasher. “What if you have an allergic reaction and need oxygen?”

“I’ve had Haloperidol before - it never did anything except make me tired.”

“I don’t know what dosage Chilton used.” Hannibal countered, shaking his head. “He might have used something weaker than what I gave you.”

“But-”

“Please, Will.” Hannibal said, holding up a hand. “Don’t fight me on this. Why don’t you go lay down in the sitting room and read for a bit? I’ll be in with you just as soon as I finish up in here.”

“Ugh!” Will groaned, throwing up his hands in frustration, before he turned and stalked out of the kitchen and into the sitting room. Fuming, he threw himself on the couch, glaring up at the ceiling, the gray swathes of light that played there. He knew Hannibal was right, that it would be better for him to stay inside, where he could be monitored safely until they knew the full effects of the drug, but it only made Will realize just how helpless he really was, how much he needed Hannibal, and he hated it. He fiddled anxiously with the drawstring of his pajama pants, wondering if he had made a mistake.

Hannibal eventually came in and settled himself in the armchair beside the couch, studying Will's stiff figure, his nervously dancing fingers. "Why don't I read to you?" He suggested. "Is *Carmilla* in here or is it in your room?"

"I finished that forever ago."

"What are you reading now?"

"I'm not."

"I see." Hannibal said, glancing over at the shelves surrounding the fireplace, the dozens of books stacked there. "...Have you ever read *Wuthering Heights* , Will?"

Will shook his head. "We read *Jane Eyre* when I was in school." He said, watching Hannibal as he stood and quickly retrieved the book. He could feel himself beginning to shake, frustrated with the situation, terrified of it.

"Did you like it?" Hannibal asked, sitting down once more and crossing his legs as he flipped to the first page of the story.

"Yes."

"I think you'll like this one, too." Hannibal reassured him. "It's very good." He cleared his throat and began to read. "'Chapter One. 1801 - I have just returned from a visit to my landlord - the solitary neighbor that I shall be troubled-'"

Will tried to focus on what Hannibal was reading, if only to distract himself from his own misery. It wasn't long before Will felt himself beginning to relax, coiled muscles loosening under the soothing cadence of Hannibal's soft voice. He drifted closer to the edge of sleep, exhausted from another long and restless night he'd had...

It took him a few moments to realize he was no longer being gently carried away to sleep so much as he was being forcibly dragged down into it, his chest tight and his limbs pinned in place. It took him several tries before he was finally able to open his eyes.

“Hannibal.” He whimpered, and the man instantly stopped reading, surging forward from his seat, closer to Will, trying to see him better.

“Will?” He fussed. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

Will panted, blinking, trying to clear his vision, trying to resist the insistent pull of the drugs, trying to coordinate his lips and tongue. How could something so easy as talking seem so impossible now?

“D-don’t like.” He managed between loud gulps of air. For how heavy his body felt, his thoughts felt weightless, wandering farther and farther away from him as he struggled to remember what he was trying to say. “H-help!”

He thought Hannibal’s fingers were on his neck, over his pulse point, but the touch was so light, so barely there, that he couldn’t be sure. “It’s alright, Will.” He heard, the voice echoing from everywhere and nowhere all at once as Will felt his eyes flutter shut. “Everything’s alright, I promise…”

The darkness swallowed Will up at last, and he knew no more.

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It may have been seconds or it may have been years when Will woke again, but it was most likely hours, judging from the way the sunlight had dripped down from the ceiling to the wall. Will blinked blearily up at the dancing beams, thoughts hazy, mouth fuzzy, and slowly rolled his head around to find Hannibal seated next to him in his chair, frowning behind the newspaper he was reading. Will squinted hard at the blurry words on the page, mere inches from his face, willing them to clear, trying to ground himself, to pull himself together…

“A-At-Atlanta J-Journal.” He slurred at last, and winced when Hannibal closed the paper with a quick, snaplike motion, staring down at Will with obvious relief.

“Will!” He breathed, smiling warmly as he set his newspaper aside. He sank from his chair to kneel beside Will, running a hand through his hair. “There you are. How are you feeling?”

“Ngh!” Will grunted, struggling to sit up, arms trembling uselessly on either side of his prone form. He felt Hannibal’s arm snake behind his back, slowly easing him up and drawing a blanket over Will’s chest when he had him propped against the pillows. “W-water…please!’

“Of course.” Hannibal promised, squeezing his hand in parting before he stood and disappeared into the kitchen. Will closed his eyes, nauseous, and forced himself to breathe slowly and deeply while he waited for Hannibal to return. He had almost fallen back asleep when he felt the hard rim of a glass press against his lip.

“Come on, Will.” Hannibal urged, his hand creeping up to cradle Will’s head, supporting it. “Drink.”

Will obeyed, far too enthusiastically it seemed, because Hannibal pulled the glass away a moment later.

“No, please!” Will pleaded, still too weak to chase it, to reach out and take it for himself. “Please.”

“You’re going to make yourself sick.” Hannibal scolded gently as he brought the water back to him. “Small sips. Slowly.”

When he had finished, Will turned his head. “No more!” He said, shaking his head. “No more!”

“Okay, Will.” Hannibal said, setting the glass on his writing desk, within easy reach. “No more. That’s enough water for now.”

“No! No drugs!” Will moaned. “No more! No!”

“Shh.” Hannibal murmured, reaching out and pressing his hand to Will’s face, stroking his cheek with his thumb. “It’s alright, Will. We can try a weaker dose next time.”

“No!” Will said loudly, shaking his head, trying to dislodge Hannibal’s hand. “No drugs! Not again - not ever again!”

“We don’t even know if they worked, Will.” Hannibal reminded him as he continued to try and soothe him. “You can’t give up just yet.”

“No!”

Hannibal sighed. “Alright, Will, alright. We’ll discuss this again when you’re feeling better. Just rest now.” Will nodded, too tired to argue, and allowed Hannibal to help him lay back down. “Are you comfortable?” Hannibal asked him once he was settled.

“Hmm-mmm.” Will hummed, fighting to stay awake, knowing he would lose the battle. Hannibal ran his fingers through Will’s hair one more time before he straightened again.

“You’ve been asleep for most of the day.” He informed Will. “I was starting to worry you’d miss dinner as well as lunch.”

“You don’t…worry.” Will said with effort. “And you’ve got…the tube.”

“True.” Hannibal agreed thoughtfully. “But I’d prefer not to use it unless I have to.” He smiled at Will, ignoring the way he shuddered. “Why don’t you go back to sleep, mylimasis?” He asked. “I’ll wake you when it’s time to eat.”

“Not much of a choice.” Will mumbled, shifting slightly on his makeshift bed.

“We’ve been through this, Will.” Hannibal said as he turned away. “You always have a choice. Even when you don’t think you do.”

When he finally left the room, Will allowed his eyes to slip shut again, and he hovered on the edge of sleep, listening to the sounds of Hannibal moving around the kitchen and drifting further and further away from consciousness…

“Will?”

Will opened his eyes, feeling a faint prickle of fear at the familiar voice. He slowly looked over and saw Abigail in Hannibal’s vacated seat, nervously wringing her hands. He blinked, vision still slightly blurry from the effects of the drugs, refusing to believe what he was seeing.

“I don’t think it’s working.” She told him, and if the circumstances were any different, he might have laughed. Laughed at just how obviously the drugs weren’t working, how pointless it was for her to point that out to him, at the absurdity of it all.

But at the moment, it was hard for him to find anything even remotely funny about the situation he was in.

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Though Hannibal advised against it, Will went back to work the next day, eager for the distraction it provided, anxious for the chance to get away from the house and forget about his problems for a little while…

…To pretend that he was normal for a few hours.

Like Ronny had promised him, the bar was never very busy, even toward the end of the week. Most of the people who stopped in were people who knew Ronny and enjoyed the quiet atmosphere of his place after a long, hard day at work. Will was starting to get to know some of the regulars, and even liked a few of them quite well, enough that he felt a lot more comfortable interacting with them when they came in.

“It’s gotta be the Patriots!” Travis, a dockhand, was insisting the night Will came back. “They go every year!”

“They do not!” Jenny May, a local elementary school custodian, argued, rolling her eyes as she redid her hair, securing her iron gray locks into her signature tight bun with several bobby pins. “They didn’t go last year!”

“Will, back me up here!” Travis said, turning toward him imploringly. “Ain’t no quarterback out there that can beat Tom Brady-”

“Drew Brees can!”

Will grinned as they continued to argue back and forth with one another. The bar was abuzz with the excitement of the approaching Super Bowl, and Will was drunk on the rush of emotion that surrounded him. It was so surreal, seeing people so happy and carefree, so delighted by something as simple, as unremarkable, as a football game, that in a way it actually made Will sad, knowing he would probably never experience something like that for himself - nights out with friends, discussing the latest games and trades over beers and bitching about hardass bosses and nagging wives and wayward children. Will had to remind himself that he had had that once and he had been miserable, despite trying to convince himself otherwise. Was he really so keen to have it back now?

‘The grass is always greener on the other side.’ An annoying little voice whispered in the back of his head. It sounded way too much like Hannibal for comfort. ‘We always want what we can’t have.’

Will ignored the little voice and focused on the job, the conversation around him. He had figured out a long time ago that happiness wasn't possible for someone like him, that there was no point looking for it, in pursuing it, because it was something he simply couldn't have. And he had always been fine with that, had known there was no point mourning what never was and never could be…

He just didn't understand why he was so concerned about it now.

Later that night, after the bar was closed and everyone had left, while Will was busy cleaning up - wiping down the countertops, taking the empty cans to the recycle bin out back, sweeping the floor for peanut shells and bottle caps - something winked brightly up at him from the shadows under the barstools. Will stopped what he was doing, trying to see what it was. He leaned the broom against the wall and stooped to pick it up, thinking perhaps it was an earring, and was surprised to see it was a bobby pin.

'Jenny May.' He thought, remembering how she had been fixing her hair earlier, the bobby pins she had held between her teeth.

She must have dropped one of them.

Will slipped the hairpin in his pocket and then went home.

The next morning, while Hannibal was preparing breakfast, Will went to his room and took Chiyoh's abandoned case from his wardrobe. He set it on his bed, glanced once at his open door, and then drew Jenny May's bobby pin from where he had put it in his sock.

He pulled it open, bending the curved metal out of shape, and stuck the flat end of the pin inside the case's keyhole. He jiggled it back and forth until he felt the pin catch, twisting it carefully around until the lock clicked. Will pulled the pin out and set it aside before he opened the case.

Nestled on the foam padding inside was a gun, lying on top of a folded piece of paper. Will took the gun, and when he checked it, he wasn't surprised to find that it was loaded.

He was surprised, however, by the note Chiyoh left behind.

'Don't forget what you're dealing with.' She advised in a curling, elegant hand.

Will stared down at the words, unsettled by them, overwhelmed at what they implied, and once more wondered what Chiyoh knew that he didn't, what could possibly have driven her to turn against Hannibal, why she was helping him now...

In the end, he knew it didn't really matter. He didn't know what had happened and he probably never would - so what was the point of worrying about it at all?

With this in mind, Will put the gun back in its case and stashed it under his bed.

Later, when he was leaving for work, he smuggled it out to his truck and hid it in the glovebox, not sure where the best place to put it was.

Will looked around the empty bar and wondered if he had missed something.

Not a soul had wandered in since he'd opened, and it was nearly five now. And while Will knew Ronny's bar was never crowded, last Friday had been the busiest day of the week (twenty-five people spread over eleven hours!). He didn't understand why it was so dead now, what had changed in just seven days.

"*... the Rams have just won five of their last six after yesterday's win over the Saints - a big win ...*"

Will closed his eyes. He had been listening to ESPN rehash the highlights of last night's game for hours, the same thing over and over and over again on a loop, every play analyzed, every minute, meaningless detail pulled apart until there was nothing left to discuss and continuing on as if there still was. He was so sick of it that he had actually broken Ronny's one rule and tried to change the station…but he hadn't been able to reach the buttons on the TV set…so unless he managed to find the remote (where he could have possibly put it, he had no idea), or someone actually decided to show up, it seemed Will would be stuck listening to it for the rest of the night.

He sighed, looking around the empty bar and trying to distract himself, and found his thoughts turning inevitably toward Hannibal.

Will wondered what he was doing now. What they would be talking about if he were here. What they would be doing if he were here…

…What they *could* be doing if he were here…

Will shook his head, determined not to go there.

Things had… *changed* with Hannibal, in ways Will couldn't quite explain. It wasn't like they were acting any differently with each other - Hannibal continued to flirt harmlessly and wax philosophy, never pushing Will for anything more than his thoughts and opinions and his company. And Will still didn't trust Hannibal and continued to remind him of that fact every chance he got, defying him purely out of spite and trading barbed insults and venom for Hannibal's adoring compliments.

And yet…

And yet not as often as he had before. Not as harshly as he had before. Instead, Will found himself thinking of Hannibal more and more with each passing day. Found himself spending less and less time outside avoiding Hannibal and more and more time with him. Watching

him. Not warily like he once had but because…because he could, and because he liked to. He liked watching Hannibal. He liked *being* with Hannibal. He liked watching him cook, the effortless way he moved around the kitchen as he talked about his youth in Paris, the way he had pressed his body against Will's, adjusting his hold on the knife, showing him how to properly prepare the vegetables for their dinner.

("Like this, mylimasis." He whispered into the soft shell of Will's ear. "Just the slightest hint of pressure.")

He liked watching him sketch, the way his skilled, sure hands would glide across the paper, the beauty they conjured from nothing. He liked studying Hannibal in the evenings, memorizing his features, fascinated by the way the shadows played across the planes of his face. He liked listening to him recite poetry as they lay together in bed and he liked listening to the tide of his breathing as he fell asleep.

And even his unconscious thoughts had shifted, somehow, some way, at some point. Where Will had once woken from blood-soaked nightmares screaming, sweating, and cringing away from Hannibal, he now woke gasping, sweating, and…aching for more of him. Where he had once dreamed of Hannibal's hands ripping him apart, fingers slipping beneath his skin to tear, he now dreamt of them moving slowly over him, caressing him softly as they roved. Where he had once dreamed of Hannibal's teeth against his throat, he now dreamt of his lips against it. And where Will had once dreamed of Hannibal looming over him in the kitchen, holding him down, preparing to plunge a knife into his heart, he now dreamt that they were in bed, Hannibal still over him, still straddling him, no knife in sight, worshipful as he pressed himself closer…

Will jumped when the door suddenly flew open with a bang and Jenny May came bustling into the bar with all the force of a small hurricane.

"Whoo! Hey, honey, get me a beer and I'll love ya forever!"

Will was quick to grab a bottle from the mini fridge under the bar, glad to finally have something to do and eager to turn his thoughts away from Hannibal. "Did you just get off work?" He asked, passing her the beer as she sat down. "I thought school let out at three."

“It does.” She assured him. “I’ve been deep cleaning the whole place top to bottom ever since they let out. Trying to get done before it got too late. Nasty stomach bug going around, you know - we had over forty kids out sick this week.”

“Great.” Will said, taking a small step back from her.

“Yeah, you’re telling me.” She said, taking a quick swig of her drink and then setting it down again. “Absolute last thing I need right now is to get sick.” She pulled a cigarette from her purse and stuck it between her teeth. “I couldn’t believe it when I saw you were open.” She continued conversationally once she had it lit, gesturing at the LED ‘Open’ sign hanging in the door. “Figured I might as well get a drink while I still can. You plannin’ on closin’ early tonight, hon?”

“For what?” Will asked her with a frown.

She raised her eyebrows at him. “Haven’t you seen the news? We’ve got bad weather comin’ in.”

“Just thunderstorms.” Will shrugged. “How bad can it be?”

“ *Bad* .” Jenny May said, taking a long drag from her cigarette. “It’s all over the radio that we’re gonna get flash floods and high winds all night long - they expect half the county will be out of power or underwater for the whole weekend.”

“Well, I guess that it explains why it’s been so quiet all day.” Will muttered, more to himself than to her. Then, louder. “When’s this supposed to start?”

“Last I heard, six or seven. Here, turn on channel twelve, see what they’re saying now.” She said, motioning to Ronny’s TV.

“I don’t have the remote.”

“So?” She said with a shrug, swapping her cigarette for her beer. “Use the buttons on the side. Just grab a chair and climb up.”

Will mumbled something under his breath.

“Wha’s that?”

“I’ve tried.” Will repeated. “I’m too short.”

Jenny May cackled with delight. “Ah, honey.” She sighed, shaking her head as she took her phone from her pocket. “We can’t have everything.”

Still chuckling, she set the phone on the counter between them and opened her weather app. She studied it for a moment before she spoke again.

“Okay. This is saying it’s supposed to start raining at nine and continue until tomorrow morning.” She said, pushing her phone closer to Will so that he could see. “Severe thunderstorms, flash flood watch for St. Charles, Jefferson, Orleans, St. Bernard, and Plaquemines parishes until tomorrow morning at six.” She looked over at Will. “So, how ‘bout it, honey - ya gonna call it a day?”

“I can’t just close up now.” Will protested. “We’ve still got a few hours before it’s supposed to start - people might come by before then.”

“Trust me, doll, the only person crazy enough to stop in today is me. And that’s only ‘cause I’m terrified of catchin’ the plague and my nerves are shot to hell. Soon as I finish my drink, I’m headin’ home - just like you should.”

“But Ronny-”

“What’s he gonna do?” Jenny May asked him, rolling her eyes. “He had surgery a week ago - the man can’t even lift his own arm!” When Will didn’t answer, she huffed at him. “Look, Ronny may be a crackpot and a bastard, but he’s not stupid. He knows he can’t expect you to work tonight, not in these conditions. Look, take my advice, honey: close up as soon as I’m done with my drink. Take the night off. Enjoy yourself before all hell breaks loose. And if Ronny gives ya a hard time, you tell Nadine. She’ll put him in his place.”

Will chuckled. “Okay.”

“Yeah? Good.” Jenny May said, swallowing the last of her beer. “How much do I owe ya?”

“Don’t worry about it.” Will told her, thinking about her bobby pin still hidden away in his room. “It’s on me.”

“Really?” She asked, brightening. “Honey, you’ve just made my day.”

“Well, you’ve made mine, so I guess we’re even.”

“Happy to help.” She said cheerfully, hopping down from her barstool. Will walked her to the door, and she fixed him with a stern look as she was getting ready to step outside. “I mean it now, boy - soon as I leave, you shut everything down and go straight home, you hear?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Hmph. ‘Ma’am,' he says.” She muttered as she turned away. “Makin’ me feel old…”

Will watched her as she climbed into her car and pulled away, his hand hovering over the switch for the ‘Open’ sign. He waited until Jenny May had disappeared down the road before he glanced up at the sky, at the thick, gray clouds overhead. It smelled like rain…and there was definitely that faint, electric feeling of a gathering storm…but it didn’t look that bad right now. Will slowly drew his hand away from the switch and pulled the door closed behind him.

He didn't lock it.

Will took out his phone and checked the weather report again. Forty percent chance of rain in an hour. Fifty percent by seven. Sixty at eight. Seventy percent chance by nine. Severe thunderstorm warning, flash flood watch beginning at ten…

Will bit his lip. He still had time before it was supposed to get bad. And he didn't want to quit yet, especially not when he really had no reason to - it wasn't raining and the roads were clear, and they would be for a while…He couldn't leave now. Not when he had promised Ronny he could count on him, not when Hannibal thought Will wasn't completely grounded in reality and incapable of making good and rational decisions.

No.

Will was going to prove to Ronny that he was reliable. He was going to stay and finish the rest of his shift like he promised. And he was going to prove to Hannibal, almost as much as he was going to prove to himself, that he was fine. That he wasn't crazy and he didn't need any help.

No, Will was going to stay. At least for a few more hours. Even if it was pointless, even if no one else showed up, he would stay and wait until he could at least justify leaving.

With a small nod to himself, Will turned and took his place behind the bar once more.

"*... Drew Brees just hasn't been the same this year. He's got a defense and a running game but under pressure …*"

Will resisted the urge to slam his forehead against the bar.

Christ, it was gonna be a long night.

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Will continued to check his phone as the night wore on, watching the weather forecast change hour by hour, the likelihood of rain increasing with every passing minute.

Seventy percent chance at nine...eighty percent chance...ninety…one hundred…

When Hannibal texted him an hour before the storms were supposed to start, the sky was already pitch black and heavy with clouds that promised rain.

‘Have you seen the news? We’re supposed to get bad weather soon. I can come and get you if you need me to.”

Will read the words, happy for an excuse to talk to Hannibal and more than tempted to accept his offer. He hesitated for a moment, considering his options.

‘It’s fine.’ He eventually wrote back. ‘My truck is probably better for the rain than your car anyway.’

Hannibal's reply came seconds after Will’s. ‘Alright. Are you leaving soon?’

‘In an hour. I’ll text when I’m about to leave.’

‘Please be careful coming home.’

‘I will.’ Will told him, and then, because he wasn’t ready to say goodbye to Hannibal just yet, ‘Everything okay at the house?’

‘Everything’s fine. I went to the store earlier and picked up extra food for the weekend and candles just in case.’

‘Sounds good. How was the store? Crazy busy?’

‘An absolute madhouse. It never ceases to amaze me how quickly man devolves to savage beast when faced with the threat of starvation.’

Will eyed his choice of words suspiciously. ‘You didn’t happen to pick up any long pig while you were there, did you?’

‘As much as I wanted to, mylimasis, the effort did not seem worth the tantrum you would no doubt throw if I did.’

Will heaved a sigh - both one of relief that Hannibal had refrained from killing anyone and one of regret when he noticed that his cell phone battery was getting dangerously low. As much as he wanted to keep texting with Hannibal, he knew he had to save his phone in case he needed it later. ‘Nice to know you are actually capable of restraint. See you in a bit.’

‘Until then, my love.’

Will rolled his eyes and shoved his phone back into his pocket, biting back a smile as he did and looking around the empty bar, trying to decide what to do.

He still had an hour to go before the storms hit, an hour to go before he could go, and he doubted anyone would show up in that time - he could hear the occasional rumble of thunder pealing in the distance, gradually getting louder and louder, closer and closer. He doubted anyone would be out right now.

Will sighed. The sixty minutes that lay before him suddenly seemed impossibly long, the time between now and the end of his shift unbearably far away...

Desperate to distract himself and with nothing else to do, Will began straightening up, getting everything ready for closing. He swept nonexistent trash and dust from the floors, wiped the gleaming counter, flipped the chairs and stacked them neatly on their tables. He took the lemons he'd brought from the storeroom back, cleaned out the big refrigerator just for the hell of it, and finally found the TV remote in the icebox (as soon as he saw it again, he suddenly remembered putting it there). Then he rinsed the sink, restocked the mini fridge, and began reorganizing the bottles of liquor that lined the shelves behind the bar.

It was only as he was taking them down, when he caught sight of his reflection in the glass, that Will realized he was grinning happily to himself and had been ever since he'd gotten off the phone with Hannibal. And it was only then that he noticed his heart was fluttering excitedly in his chest, and that most of, if not all, his thoughts for the past half hour had been revolving around Hannibal and the fact that he would be seeing him again soon…

Will stopped what he was doing, horrified. What was the *matter* with him? He was being ridiculous. Worse, he was being stupid. God, was he really that easy? He knew better. He knew he couldn't afford to let his guard down when it came to Hannibal. Couldn't let himself be distracted by his pretty, empty words and superficial charm. It could get him killed.

Don't ever forget what he is, Will. It's important that you don't .

Will sighed again.

Of course he knew what Hannibal was - it was why he chose him in the end. And he knew what a life with him would mean - it was why he pulled them over the side of the cliff. And he understood that he would spend the rest of his life fighting Hannibal and fighting himself, caught between what he wanted to be and what he actually was. Perhaps that was why Will was so convinced he couldn't be happy - because he knew that from the moment he had met Hannibal, he was doomed.

Can't live with him. Can't live without him…

Will jumped as an impossibly loud crack of thunder suddenly sounded overhead and the sky opened at long last. The rain came down in buckets, pelting the roof of the bar with the force of hail and sluicing down the windows and door, making the view beyond them run. Will checked his watch, his jaw twinging painfully at the sudden change in pressure. A little after eight-thirty - the storm had come early. Knowing there was no point waiting around any more, Will finished stacking the liquor bottles on their shelves and turned off most of the lights and the TV. It was as he was locking the cash drawer when Will heard the door creak open behind him.

"Hey, we're closed!" He called out, annoyed. Who on earth would be walking into the bar right now? He turned, but stopped abruptly when he saw the shadowy figure of a man standing between him and the door.

The man pointed at the lit 'Open' sign behind him.

"I'm sorry." He said. He had a slight accent that Will couldn't quite place. "I thought you were open."

"I was just getting ready to turn it off." Will told him. He squinted, trying to see him better in the dim light, and the man stepped closer.

He looked like he had just climbed out of a swimming pool, his clothes soaking wet and his blonde hair plastered to his head. He was older than Will, taller and broader than him too, and it seemed the muscles of his thickset build were beginning to turn to flab. He looked at Will with piercing, ice blue eyes and grinned at him sheepishly, gesturing to himself.

"I didn't know it was supposed to rain today." He explained. "I would have brought my umbrella."

Will raised his eyebrows at him, looking doubtfully over his shoulder at the downpour outside. "I don't think it would have helped." He said, handing the man a few paper napkins.

"No. Probably not." The man agreed, taking the napkins from Will and patting his face dry with them. "Thank you."

“Sure thing.” Will said, still frowning at him. He found it odd that the man hadn’t known about the storms - even Will had heard about them and he had been inside an empty bar all day with only a TV stuck on ESPN for company. He reached under the bar, fingers brushing the rifle Ronny kept there, and the cool metal reassured him. “What are you doing out on a night like this?” He asked. “Don’t tell me you’re here for a drink.”

The man shook his head. “Got lost.” He said. His accent was driving Will crazy - what was it? Polish? Ukrainian? “I’m not from here. I’m making a delivery for my boss, and I took a wrong turn. Your bar was the only place open I’ve seen in an hour. I was hoping someone could tell me how to get back on the highway?”

“Which one?”

“I-10. I need to be in Atlanta by tomorrow morning.”

“You’re hell and gone from it.” Will informed him, grabbing another paper napkin and the pen he kept by the register. He sketched a quick map and pushed it toward the stranger. “Turn right out of the bar and follow the road for about twenty minutes until you come to a crossroads.” He said, tracing the route with his finger. “Then turn left. Stay on this road for about an hour - it’ll take you back to downtown New Orleans. Once you’re there, you’ll see signs for the highway.” He glanced at the man again. “You probably want to get going soon.” He said. “We’re supposed to get bad flooding later tonight. You wanna get as far from here as you can before it hits.”

The man frowned at him. “Flooding?” He asked, pronouncing the word slowly, hesitantly, as if he had never heard it before.

“It means the river and lake are gonna rise and the roads are gonna be underwater.” Will explained.

“Ah.” The man said with a nod. “That is not good.”

“No, it’s not good.” Will echoed, shifting impatiently on his feet. “It can be dangerous when it happens - people get stranded, they can drown. That’s why I’m closing early.”

“I understand.” The man said, taking Will’s map. “Thank you for all your help.”

“Yep.” Will said, distracted as he gathered the damp napkins on the counter and threw them in the trash. When he turned back and saw the man hadn’t moved, a faint ripple of unease passed through him. “Was there something else?”

The man grinned. “Think I could trouble you for a drink while I’m here?”

Will stared at him. “I don’t think you should be drinking and driving in this kind of weather.” He said slowly. The man shrugged.

“Just a small one for the road?” He begged, holding up a thick, sausage-like finger. “Maybe this much?”

“...Fine.” Will said, annoyed now as he took out a glass. “What do you want?”

“Vodka. Please.”

“You want anything with it?”

“What? And ruin it? No, no, just vodka.” Will passed him his drink and watched him gulp it down. “Ah!” He said, smacking his lips. “There is nothing better than a good glass of vodka, no?”

“I prefer whiskey, myself.” Will said shortly. He was getting more and more frustrated, more and more nervous, with each passing second the man lingered.

“What’s your name?”

“Um...John.” Will said, distracted. “Wh-”

“I’m Mikhail. Can I buy you one?”

“One what?”

“Whiskey.”

What ?

Will stared at him. Was he hitting on him? Was he messing with him? Did he not understand what Will had said about the floods? Did he just not care, or was he just plain stupid?

“No.” Will said, trying to force as much irritation into that single syllable word as possible.

Mikhail’s shoulders slumped dejectedly. He nodded, more to himself than Will.

“I’m sorry.” He said. “I know you’re anxious to get home. It's just been so long since I’ve talked to another person, I forgot how much I missed it.”

He sighed, and Will felt a sharp stab of loneliness at his words, remembering his own sad existence before he met Hannibal. He watched Mikhail as he dug unhappily through his pockets, and Will couldn’t help but pity him.

“Here.” Mikhail said eventually, laying a crisp hundred dollar bill on the counter. “Thank you for all your help.”

He turned away, and for a few seconds, Will could only stand there gaping after him, too thunderstruck to speak.

"Wait!" Will called after him eventually, torn between exasperation and guilt. "That's way too much! Hang on, just let me get you your change-"

"Keep it." Mikhail said simply. "You've been very kind to me. That's something that's hard to come by these days."

Jesus Christ. Just how deprived of human contact was this poor bastard that he actually considered Will 'kind' and pleasant company?

"I can't keep it!" Will snapped at him, frustration winning over sympathy. "You're paying fifteen times what you owe! Just hold on a second, let me-"

"I won't take it." Mikhail said firmly, backing further away from him.

Will growled and rolled his eyes, not sure what to do, not sure what else he *could* do, short of grabbing Ronny's rifle and demanding Mikhail take his money back at gunpoint. He wasn't even sure why he cared so much (if the man wanted to throw away ninety-four dollars, then fine, who was Will to stop him?). All he knew was that there was something about this whole thing he didn't like.

Mikhail had been watching Will as he silently debated what to do. He took a small, hopeful step back, closer to him.

"How about this?" He suggested. "You owe me a drink. The next time I'm in town, I'll come back for it."

"I think I owe you a lot more than one drink." Will argued weakly. Mikhail shrugged.

“Alright. Then you owe me more than one drink.” He cocked his head with a friendly smile. “Sound fair?”

Will hesitated, and then nodded. “Deal.”

Mikhail beamed. “ *Po rukam* !” He cried, clapping his meaty hands together. “I’m glad we have an understanding!”

“Yeah, great we’ve got that settled.” Will muttered, far less enthusiastically. He already regretted the agreement. Mostly because it meant that Will would need to explain to Ronny at some point that he owed a strange, Eastern European man almost a hundred dollars worth of alcohol...which sounded like about as much fun as trying to persuade Hannibal to eat a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

“Yes, very good.” Mikhail said happily. “Have a nice night, John! I look forward to seeing you again!”

Will didn’t answer him. He watched silently as Mikhail turned and disappeared out the door and into the heavy rain, wondering what the hell had just happened and feeling vaguely ill at ease with the whole thing.

Will didn’t wait around for very long after Mikhail left - only long enough to grab his jacket and keys and to turn off the remaining lights in the bar.

He saved the ‘Open’ sign for last, flipping the switch before slipping out into the rain.

He was drenched the moment he stepped outside.

Will fumbled with the front door lock for a few moments, the key wet and slippery in his chilled fingers, but as soon as he managed to secure it, he was sprinting across the parking lot to his truck, ripping the door open and throwing himself inside.

The difference between the miserable, wet outside of the car and dry interior was jarring, and for several minutes, Will could only sit there panting, his jaw throbbing, his teeth chattering, while the rain continued to pummel his windshield mercilessly.

It took him a moment to notice the vehicle that was idling across the lot.

Will frowned. It looked like a small moving van of some kind - large, white, and nondescript. The engine was running and the lights were on, bathing the road beyond in a harsh yellow glare, but just who was behind the wheel, Will couldn't tell.

'It has to be Mikhail.' He reasoned. He had only been a few seconds behind him, after all, and Will doubted there was anyone else out in this weather. 'He's probably getting ready to leave. Just getting his bearings.'

But nearly a minute passed and the van did nothing. It just continued to sit there in the rain. Will waited, wondering what the hell Mikhail was doing, and eventually decided he didn't particularly care and that he had had enough of the bizarre night and wanted nothing more to do with it. He stuck his key in the ignition and turned it.

Nothing happened. The engine didn't even try to turn over.

Will felt his stomach sink, but he stubbornly ignored it and tried again.

Still nothing.

Desperate now, Will tore the key from the ignition and then shoved it back in, twisting it hard. A high pitched whine erupted from somewhere under the truck's hood, and then pathetically died down.

If it weren't for the thunder and rain, the engine's silence would have been deafening.

Will stared numbly out at his truck, at the unresponsive dials, vaguely wondering what was wrong and trying to figure out what to do next. He knew he needed to call Hannibal, and at some point, a tow truck and a mechanic, but calling for help now felt like admitting defeat. Like he was only confirming how helpless he was on his own, how much he needed Hannibal…

A sharp knock on his window made Will jump, and he whipped around to find Mikhail just outside his door. He cautiously pushed it open.

"Trouble with your car?" Mikhail shouted over the storm, less than a foot away from him.

"Yeah, I don't know what's wrong - I can't get it to start!" Will called back.

"Do you want a ride?"

"No, that's okay. I'm gonna call my friend to come pick me up."

"Are you sure?" Mikhail asked, frowning at him.

"Yeah, don't worry, I'm fine."

But Mikhail shook his head. "I can wait with you until your friend comes." He offered.

“No, you go on!” Will told him. “It’s gonna take him a while to get here and I don’t want you to get stuck out here if the floods start.”

“But I don’t like the idea of you being out in this by yourself.” Mikhail protested. “Trust me, there’s no one around for miles! What if you need help?”

“I’ll be fine!” Will said. “Look, don’t worry about me, just go!”

“What if I take you home?” Mikhail said next.

“No, that’s okay-”

“Please, John, it’s no trouble.”

“Look I live really out of the way.” Will said, getting frustrated. “And in the complete opposite direction of where you’re going.”

“I don’t mind.” Mikhail insisted. “Please. Let me help you. For my peace of mind - I won’t sleep tonight if I don’t know you made it home safe. And also...for my pleasure.”

Will hesitated, and glanced down at his phone.

The battery was almost dead. If he called Hannibal to come get him, he’d have to wait at least half an hour for him to reach the bar, maybe even longer if the roads were bad. And then it would take another half hour for the two of them to drive back home. And by that time, who knew what the conditions would be like - waiting that long was likely only putting them both in danger. Not to mention, Hannibal had never been to Ronny’s bar (as far as Will knew). If he made a wrong turn or needed directions, Will couldn’t be sure his phone would last long enough to help him if he got lost.

Will sighed.

Like Hannibal kept insisting, he had a choice.

But it wasn't much of one.

"All right." He told Mikhail. "Thank you."

"Of course, John!" Mikhail said. "I'm happy to help. Here, I'll bring my car around!"

So saying, he turned and jogged back to his truck.

Trying to ignore the growing anxiety in his chest, Will pulled out his phone and sent a quick message to Hannibal.

'Hey. Car won't start. Getting a ride from a friend. See you soon'

And because he didn't especially want to see what Hannibal had to say to that, and because he didn't especially feel like explaining who his new friend was and what had happened, Will silenced his phone and stuffed it back into his pocket.

Will waited as Mikhail pulled his van closer to his truck, and it was only once he stopped a few feet away that he reached for the handle, preparing to bolt. But the moment his fingers brushed the plastic shaft, he suddenly stopped, remembering. He glanced once at Mikhail to make sure he couldn't see him, and then Will opened the glovebox and took out Chiyoh's gun.

He disengaged the safety.

And he slipped it into the inside pocket of his jacket.

Once he had it tucked away, Will climbed out of his truck and dashed for Mikhail's, slamming the door shut firmly behind him. Mikhail beamed warmly from the driver's seat.

"Where to?" He asked.

"Take a right out of the parking lot." Will told him, wrapping his arms around his shivering frame. "Keep going till you reach the crossroads."

"Okay."

"Listen, I really appreciate it. I think I owe you a lot more drinks for this."

"Think nothing of it." Mikhail said, waving his large hand airily. "I'm always happy to help out a friend."

The ride was awkward. Neither of them spoke for several minutes as Mikhail turned out of the parking lot and began to carefully navigate the dark, wet road, his windshield wipers dancing frantically and his headlights only managing to illuminate a few feet in front of his van. Will sat silently beside him, miserable in his soaking clothes. They clung, cold and uncomfortable, to his shaking frame, and Will kept his arms wrapped tight around himself, trying to trap what little heat he had and trying to think of something, *anything* , to say.

("Crossing your arms serves two purposes. In part, it's a self-pacifying gesture, something you might do to comfort yourself when you feel anxious. Playing with a piece of jewelry, or your hair, biting your nails, touching your face…these are all gestures that stimulate the nerve endings in our fingers and release calming endorphins. It also serves as a barrier, something to put between yourself and whatever it is you perceive as a threat. Tell me, Will, what is it that is making you so nervous right now…").

WIll rolled his eyes. Ever helpful, his brain. Always ready to supply him with a memory or a thought he didn't want. Especially with ones concerning Hannibal.

He glanced over at Mikhail. He wondered if he had ever heard of self-pacifying gestures. If he knew anything about psychology or basic body language, or if he could tell how out of his depth Will was at that moment.

"So." Will said, determined to break the silence and provide stimulating conversation for his host. "What…did you have to deliver for your boss?"

Or, if he was setting a more realistic goal for himself, a conversation that at least helped pass the time.

"Hmm?"

"You said you were making a delivery for your boss." Will reminded him. "What was it?"

"I haven't made it yet." Mikhail told him. "I had to pick it up and bring it back to him."

"Oh." Will waited, but Mikhail didn't elaborate. "Do you…often make deliveries?"

"A few a year, yes."

"And what kinds of things do you usually deliver?"

"Whatever my boss needs me to."

Jesus Christ! He was giving Will nothing to work with!

“Do you like your job?” Will asked, beginning to feel like he was wasting his time.

“Oh yes.” Mikhail said cheerfully. “Very much.”

“Well, that’s…good.” Will said, not sure what else there was to say.

“Yes, a man is truly blessed if he has a job he enjoys.” Mikhail said. “Do you like your job, John?”

Will shrugged. “It’s alright. Not exactly my first choice for a job, but I kind of have to take what I can get right now.”

“Why?”

Will hesitated. “My…partner and I were supposed to move away a few weeks ago.” He explained. “But something came up unexpectedly and changed our plans. So now, we’re kind of stuck here.”

“Ah.” Mikhail said with a nod. “I see. Are you still planning to move?”

“Yeah, eventually. But it might take a while before we can.” Will said, and felt the usual flare of worry whenever he thought about Hannibal’s (so far) fruitless quest to find a new forger. Though Hannibal had warned him it would take time to find someone who was skilled enough and trustworthy enough to produce what they needed, every day that passed unsuccessfully only convinced Will more that they would never find anybody who could meet Hannibal’s standards.

“That’s a shame.” Mikhail said lightly. “I was hoping to see you again the next time I was in New Orleans.”

“You might.” Will told him. “I really don’t know how long we’ll be here. Do you think you’ll be back soon?”

“I don’t know. My schedule is a bit…unpredictable. It depends on the whims of my boss.”

“Oh.” Will said with a frown. He would have thought that making deliveries was a pretty set routine. Maybe Mikhail worked for a small or independent company.

It was a relief when Will noticed a familiar shape ahead on the road. He sat forward a bit.

“Okay. You see this big oak tree ahead?” He asked, pointing to it.

“Mmm-hmm.”

“That means we’re getting close to the crossroads.” Will explained. “Now when you get there, you want to turn right, okay?”

“Okay.”

The few minutes that it took to get there felt much longer to Will, anxious to get home, but eventually, he was able to make out the four-way intersection just ahead by the yellow beams of the van’s headlights.

“Okay here.”

Mikhail switched on his blinker…

And turned left.

For a second, Will couldn't quite believe what had just happened, glancing from the quickly receding road behind them to Mikhail. "Umm…" He said. "You needed to turn right back there, Mikhail."

"Oh, did I?" Mikhail asked him. "I'm sorry, John. English isn't my first language. I'm afraid I sometimes get words mixed up."

"That's okay." Will told him. "There's a road up ahead you can use to turn around."

A beat of awkward silence passed.

"So, uh, what is your first language?" Will asked him. "Your accent's very good - it's hard to tell where you're from."

"Thank you." Mikhail said. "I was born in Minsk, but my family moved to St. Petersburg when I was three."

"St. Petersburg, Russia?"

"Yes."

"Oh." Something stirred nervously in Will's gut for reasons he couldn't explain. "When did you come to the States?"

"I was twenty-one when I came here."

"And…do you like it here?"

“Oh, yes.” Mikhail assured him. “Americans are very good people - very kind, very trusting…almost naive, really. I find it adorable.”

There was something in his tone that didn’t sound quite right, but Will shoved the thought aside when he saw they had reached the road where they could safely turn around.

“Okay, turn right here.”

But instead of slowing down, Mikhail sped up, and drove right past where Will had indicated.

“Hey!” Will snapped, turning to him. “You missed the turn!”

“I know.”

A prickle of icy fear shot through Will’s veins. He stared at Mikhail, realization slowly beginning to dawn on him as he studied his cold, hard face.

“...Stop the car.” Will said. “Right now. Stop the car!”

Mikhail ignored him. Will grabbed the door handle, yanking at it frantically, but it didn’t budge.

He was locked inside.

Desperate now, trying to ignore his growing panic, Will threw his arms against the window, pounding it, trying to break the glass. “Pull over!” Will shouted. “Now! Stop the fucking car-”

The unmistakable sound of a gun being cocked silenced him immediately. Will slowly turned his head and found himself looking down the barrel of a revolver.

Mikhail kept one hand on the wheel and his eyes on the road and the gun trained on Will as he spoke. “It would be best.” He said slowly. “If you kept quiet. I don’t want to shoot you, Will. But I will if I have to.”

Will felt as if he had been punched, like all the air in his lungs was suddenly gone. He stared at Mikhail, his heart racing.

“What?” He breathed.

Mikhail glanced over at him, his eyes hard. “Will Graham.” He intoned. “Or John Gray, as you go by now. Isn’t that right?”

Will couldn’t speak for several moments. “You don’t know what you’re talking about-”

“I think I do.” Mikhail interrupted him coldly. “Yuri may be a prick and a pervert, but he never forgets a job. And you certainly left an impression on him.”

Will wondered distantly if he was in shock. It would explain why he felt so terribly cold, so numb. “You know Yuri?”

“Oh yes.” Mikhail said with a grin. “He’s our company’s best asset.”

Will swallowed. “And what does Yuri want?”

“Yuri? Not much. Our boss, however, is very interested in meeting you, Mr. Graham. You and your boyfriend cost us quite a lot of money with your little stunt, you know.”

Will's mind raced, trying to figure out what he meant. He remembered Hannibal telling him that buying a new identity was expensive, and he knew that Hannibal had been offended when Yuri changed the price on him. He had just figured it had been outrageously high, but he hadn't considered the possibility that Hannibal had been expected, or even obligated, to pay it.

"Look, I don't know anything about that." Will tried to explain. "But I can guarantee you that whatever it is we owe, I can't afford it-"

"I know you can't. But Hannibal Lecter can." Mikhail said. "He has more money than you could ever imagine, Mr. Graham. The Russians were desperate to get their hands on it during the occupation."

"So what, this is a ransom? You're hoping for some kind of an exchange? My life for Hannibal's money?"

"Something like that."

Will's heart stuttered fearfully. "It won't work." Will told him. "Hannibal won't come for me. Look, I don't know what you think, but we're not-"

"I think that's precisely what he'll do." Mikhail said. "Everyone knows the nature of your… relationship. TattleCrime has done an excellent job documenting it."

Not for the first time, Will cursed Freddie Lounds and promised himself that if they made it out of this alive, he'd let Hannibal do whatever he wanted to her.

"If you've read TattleCrime, then you know all about what Hannibal's done. What he's capable of." Will tried next. "You really think it's a good idea to piss him off?"

“Hannibal Lecter is a man.” Mikhail scoffed. “A psychopath, perhaps, and a monster of a man, but a man all the same. And even for everything he’s done, I doubt he can win against all of us.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure.” Will warned him.

Mikhail grinned, showing yellowed teeth. “You seem very confident in him, Will. Which is why I’m going to let you in on a little secret: we don’t plan on letting him live.”

Will looked over at him sharply. Mikhail wasn’t looking at him. He was watching the road. Will eyed the gun that was still pointed at him, and then slowly wrapped his arms around himself again, hunching slightly forward so that his jacket covered him more. He slowly inched his right hand inside his coat, reaching for the pocket on the left side.

For the gun.

Will knew he had to do something, and fast. He was getting farther and farther from Hannibal, and closer and closer to New Orleans, to the highway. And the road they were on now would be curving closer to the swamp soon, and Will was sure the water was already beginning to rise…

Will managed to grab the gun and drew it out of his pocket. He pointed it at Mikhail, keeping it hidden under his jacket.

“What makes you think I won’t try and stop you?” He asked.

Mikhail snorted. “You? What can you possibly do?” He asked. “You make one wrong move, and I will shoot you.”

“You shoot me, and you have nothing you can use to lure Hannibal to you.”

“I can still shoot you without killing you.” Mikhail reminded him. “You’d be shocked at what a man can survive…even if he wished he didn't.”

Will’s heart quickened slightly at those words.

“Not much shocks me anymore.” He said quietly.

“No, I’d imagine not.” Mikhail agreed. “After everything you’ve seen and done…you’re almost as bad as he is now, aren’t you?”

Will shrugged. “Some might say I’m worse.”

“I kind of doubt that.”

Will’s mouth was dry, but he still managed to ask. “You don’t think so?”

“Not at all. You’ve never killed for pleasure like he has, have you? The only people you’ve killed, you’ve killed in self-defense or in the line of duty. You don’t enjoy it like he does.”

Will licked his lips and tightened his grip on the gun.

“I’m going to enjoy this.” He said quietly.

A few things then happened all at once.

Will lunged for the steering wheel, jerking it sharply to the side.

The car spun off the road.

Mikhail shouted.

And a gun went off.

And I Let You Under My Skin

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The truck swerved.

Mikhail shouted.

And a gun went off.

It was blinding, deafening. For a second, Will saw nothing but the black afterimage of the gunflash burned onto his retinas, heard nothing after the shot but a high-pitched ringing in his ears…

And then came the pain.

It exploded across Will's forehead as he slammed into the dashboard of the car, and he knew no more.

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The pain was still there when Will eventually regained consciousness, growing exponentially worse with each and every moment that passed.

His head was killing him - there was a constant, pounding ache above his brow that dragged him mercilessly back from the black depths of sleep, impossible to ignore. He was pressed uncomfortably against the hard plastic of the dash, his neck twisted at an awkward angle, and his stomach churned threateningly the more and more aware he became.

Will groaned, and even that hurt. He tried to sit up. The pain in his head flared sharply when he did, white hot and blinding, and he gasped, collapsing back against the truck. His stomach heaved, there was bile in his mouth. Something warm and wet and sticky was dripping sluggishly down from his forehead. Will blinked matted eyelashes to clear red-tinted vision, listening to the sound of the rain drumming relentlessly against the roof of the truck, the wipers whipping frantically back and forth across the windshield, his own ragged breathing.

What happened? He wondered dazedly, trying to remember. His thoughts were jumbled - hard to grasp, even harder to hold. He had been at the bar, and then…car accident? No, that wasn't right - something had happened before that, in between. What was it? Something bad, he knew, something important…But what?

Will hovered on the edge of consciousness, drifting in and out of it, as memories came trickling back to him in bits and pieces, frustratingly slow and disjointed. The bar, Jenny May, the weather report, the remote in the icebox, thunder crashing, closing early…

Mikhail…

Will felt his breath catch sharply and his heart stutter fearfully. Mikhail - where was Mikhail?! What had happened to him? Will couldn't hear him, couldn't see him from the position his head was turned, couldn't tell or even guess where he was, what he was doing. If he was hurt, if he was simply stunned or dead or just waiting for the right moment to pounce...And Will's hands were empty. The gun was gone - where was the gun?! Dropped? Taken? He didn't know, but he didn't want to risk confronting Mikhail without it. Not when Mikhail had a gun of his own, not when Will didn't know what kind of state he was in. So Will stayed where he was, willing his breathing to slow as he strained to hear, trying to figure out what was going on.

He didn't know how long he lay draped against the dashboard of the truck, panting shallowly, trying to be quiet, his eyes slowly adjusting to the dim glow of the headlights, but it felt like a long time had passed before he finally decided he couldn't afford to wait any longer and

cautiously raised his head a few inches, turning to look back toward the driver's seat, not knowing what to expect and fearing the absolute worst…

Instead, he found Mikhail slumped against his door, blue eyes wide and staring, a bullet hole between them.

Will nearly collapsed again with relief at the sight. He was dead. Mikhail was dead. He couldn't hurt Will, Will didn't have to worry about him any more - he was safe. Will heaved a small, shuddering sigh and slowly sat up, ignoring the stabbing pain that shot through his skull as he groped for his door handle.

It took him almost a minute and several futile pulls to remember Mikhail had locked him in.

Will pressed his aching head against the cool glass of the window with a groan, his eyes fluttering shut. God, he was tired. He was so tired. Tired and cold and everything hurt and he just wanted it to stop. He wanted to sleep. He wouldn't hurt anymore if he was asleep…But Will knew he couldn't sleep, that he had to stay awake (why was that again?). That he couldn't stay here, that it wasn't safe (why wasn't it safe?), and that he needed to figure out a way to get back home to Hannibal...

And then Will remembered, and he sat bolt upright with a gasp, ignoring the sudden rush of agony that followed. The storm! The roads! The roads were going to flood! He needed to move, he needed to get back home to Hannibal before it - Hannibal! He needed to call Hannibal! He could help him, he would save him!

With shaking fingers, Will pulled his cell phone from his pocket and pressed the power button.

Nothing happened.

Will tried again.

Nothing. The screen remained black, unresponsive.

Dead.

Will blamed the head injury for the tears that sprang to his eyes then, for the hopeless, frustrated sob that tore it way up his throat and dissipated into the empty, uncaring night air.

Will was alone. Alone, and far from the house, and hurt. No one knew where he was, that he needed help, and no one would know because his phone was dead and he couldn't call anyone to help him. He couldn't call Hannibal. Hannibal wasn't coming. He wasn't going to save Will this time...

He was on his own.

It was this realization that made Will sniff and swipe impatiently at his eyes. Hannibal wasn't coming to save him. He would have to save himself. And if he was going to make it out of this, he couldn't afford to just sit around feeling sorry for himself. Crying like an idiot wasn't going to solve anything, and it certainly wasn't going to help him. No, right now he needed to pull himself together, to figure out what he needed to do...

Will shifted in his seat, peering out the windshield, through the haze of rain and the dancing windshield wipers. By the dim light of the headlights, he could see the car had swerved several feet off the road before it had come to a stop, and that the hood was bent, crunched like a wrinkled piece of aluminum foil, from where the car had obviously collided with something. Will couldn't see what they had hit - whatever it was, it was too low to the ground, crouched down in front of the truck. Rather than worry about something that probably didn't matter, Will instead turned his gaze back toward the road, and though the rain was still coming down hard, Will could see that it was clear - the floods hadn't started yet. He still had time. But how much time, he couldn't say.

He needed to hurry.

Will glanced around the car and saw that Chiyoh's gun was on the floor - he must have dropped it when they crashed. He quickly retrieved it again and switched the safety on before

stuffing it inside his jacket. He doubted he would need it, but he decided it was better to be prepared and keep it on him just in case he did.

Next, Will checked the glovebox, shoving the papers inside impatiently aside. Registration, insurance card, owner's manual, paper napkins, maps…and a small flashlight buried underneath it all. Will took it, switched it on. He swept the light around the car one more time to make sure he hadn't missed anything important before he stuck it between his teeth and dragged himself over Mikhail's body, reaching for the door handle. It took him a few tries to grab it, but when he finally did, when he finally yanked it back, the door swung open easily at his touch. Will pulled himself over the corpse and tumbled out of the truck, legs nearly buckling under his weight when he landed on the ground.

He could see now that it was a thick tree stump that they had hit, and that the car was still partially wrapped around it, that it was holding them in place. Will wondered briefly if he was stuck, if he'd even be able to pull the truck away when he tried, and what he would do if he couldn't, but decided he'd cross that bridge when he came to it. Keeping one hand on the van to steady himself, Will stumbled around to the back of the truck, straight for the cargo area.

There was a reason Mikhail had decided to take a box truck to fetch Will, he knew it - it was part of his design. There was something in the trunk, there had to be, something he had believed he might need if Will resisted, refused to cooperate. Something that would have helped him take Will, or secure him, or get him back to Atlanta without arousing suspicion.

Whatever it was he had in there, whatever he had been planning to use it for, Will was sure that it could help him too.

Will fumbled with the latch for a few seconds, but eventually he managed to get it undone. He pushed the rolling door up and away and nearly dropped the flashlight when he caught sight of what was on the other side.

A folding gurney sat waiting for him, its thick leather straps stretched suggestively open across the cushion, metal cuffs glinting wickedly from the guardrails. Will stared at it and felt sick, knowing that if the night had gone any differently, he would probably be on that gurney now, tied down and most likely gagged, drugged out of his mind and completely helpless to stop whatever Yuri and the others had planned for him and Hannibal. Considering what he had so narrowly escaped, what it represented, Will was reluctant to move any closer to the

gurney than he had to, but when he caught sight of the cardboard boxes stacked behind it against the far wall, Will groaned and then dutifully climbed inside. He held the light out in front of him like a sword as he approached the open cartons.

He found rope. Duct tape. Bottles of rubbing alcohol, bleach, and water. Needles wrapped in plastic packaging, vials of unknown liquids carefully labeled in Cyrillic letters. Will shivered and dropped them back inside the boxes, and felt a sharp thrill of satisfaction when he heard the glass crack on impact. Once he was sure there was nothing else he could use, Will stuck the flashlight between his teeth again and grabbed the rubbing alcohol. He clambered out from the cargo area and made his way back to the front of the truck.

He tossed the bottles onto the floor of the truck and took the flashlight from his mouth, setting it within easy reach on the dash. It took him a long time to shove Mikhail over to the passenger seat, where Will had been sitting only a few minutes before, but he eventually cleared just enough space so that he could wedge himself behind the wheel.

By the time Will crawled back up into the van, he was exhausted, and he had to resist the urge to drop his head against the steering wheel and close his eyes for just a second, just one second, to give himself a minute to recover. He didn't have time for that - he had no idea how long he had been out, how much longer he had before the floods finally started, and he still had a lot to do before the night was over...

He eyed the dented hood warily as he put the car in reverse and switched his foot from the brake to the gas. There was a loud groan as he slowly backed away from the stump, and after a brief, heart-stopping moment where the truck refused to move any further, it finally came free, the twisted metal shrieking as it shifted in the open air. As soon as Will had cleared the tree, he spun the wheel, carefully easing the van back onto the road. He glanced over at Mikhail's body, trying to decide where to go, what the best place to dispose of him would be...

And then he put the car in drive.

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In July 2008, a two year old girl was reported missing to the Orlando police department. The child's mother told police her child had been taken thirty days prior by a trusted babysitter, and that the only reason she was contacting them now was because she had exhausted all other resources trying to get her daughter back. The girl's mother, Casey, was arrested the next day and charged with child neglect and obstructing an investigation after the police discovered she had been lying to them about where she worked and the babysitter's address. Over the next couple months, the search for the missing girl would continue, and the mother was eventually charged with her murder. But it wasn't until December of that same year that a child's skeleton was pulled from a nearby swamp, and DNA testing confirmed that it was Caylee Anthony.

Almost two years later, a jury acquitted Casey Anthony of murder, mostly because there was not enough evidence to prove her guilt. The child's remains were so decomposed when they were found that the exact cause of death could not be determined, and what exactly happened to Caylee, how she died, remains unsolved to this day.

At the time of the investigation and trial, Will was still working for the FBI, lecturing at Quantico, and after it was over, he discussed it extensively with his class. Together they built a psychological profile of the likely culprit and of Casey Anthony. They talked at length about the psychology of pathological liars and whether Casey was one or not, and how to recognize one should they ever encounter one in the field. They analyzed the case, the police and forensic reports, they examined at length what little evidence there was, and they evaluated everything the police did wrong.

Will also took this time to review the basics of decomposition with them.

'Decay begins at the moment of death and occurs by two processes: autolysis, or the breakdown of tissue by the body's own enzymes, and putrefaction, which is due to bacteria. Both of these cause the release of various chemical compounds that further advance the body's breakdown. In the first few hours following death, rigor mortis occurs and blood begins to pool, causing discoloration, or lividity. Whatever oxygen is left in the body is quickly used, and anaerobic microbes replace aerobic ones. These consume various nutrients, proliferating and releasing different gasses, which cause the body to bloat and the tissues to liquify. The buildup of gas creates pressure, which eventually causes the skin to rupture. From here, we move on to active decay and then advanced decay, until the soft tissue is gone and only the dry portions of the body - the bones, cartilage, and skin - remain.'

Will had paused then, leveling his students with a stern glare over his glasses, irritated by their squeamish expressions.

‘The rate at which decomposition occurs depends on several factors - temperature, oxygen, the cause of death, soil type, humidity, to name a few. For example, a body decomposes twice as fast in open air than it does in water, and eight times that if buried. The colder it is, the slower decay is, and while moisture may help speed the process up, too much limits oxygen, and therefore inhibits it.’

It seemed like it was just yesterday that Will was standing in that lecture hall, talking at a sea of faces about the country’s latest horror story. The fact that it wasn’t, that it was years ago and that Will was a different person back then than he was now, was hard to believe. How far he had come, how far he’d fallen...Will wasn’t even sure he’d recognize his former self if he met him again today. And the further and further he drove, the closer and closer he came to a stretch in the road that dipped alarmingly close to the shore of Lake Pontchartrain, the more and more Will considered just who exactly he had become, everything he had done over the years, and what he was planning to do now.

Because it was a delicate balance, what he was hoping to achieve that night, one that was almost guaranteed to fail and something that he would have to be crazy to even consider trying.

But the thing was...

There was already some question as to whether or not Will was crazy...

Wasn’t there?

—-------

It looked like the lake was already beginning to rise by the time Will reached the bend in the road he had been searching for and pulled over. The earth was soft, saturated, under the wheels of the truck as he navigated the short distance between the pavement and the shore, spraying mud and debris behind him as he went.

Will parked the truck and then reached over to check Mikhail's pockets, extracting a damp wallet from his coat with fingers that were stiff with cold. He flipped it open - several hundred dollars in cash, a few credit cards, and a driver's license. Will pried the license from the leather bindings and held it under the beam of his flashlight. It had been issued (supposedly) in the state of Illinois to a 'Michael Smith', who bore an uncanny resemblance to what was left of Mikhail...

It was very convincing, Mikhail's license, and if Will hadn't known any better, if he hadn't already seen Yuri's work, he probably never would have even suspected that it was fake.

But he had.

That was the whole reason he was here.

Scowling, Will shoved the license back inside the wallet and then stuffed it in his own jacket before turning back to Mikhail again. Once more his fingers dove beneath wet folds of clinging fabric, emerging with a crumpled receipt from a local gas station, a lighter, a crushed carton of cigarettes, and a couple of loose coins.

He kept it all.

When he was sure that there was nothing left that could be used to help identify the body, Will then climbed out of the truck and into the rain.

The ground squelched under Will's feet as he made his way around to the back of the van, and as he was opening the cargo hold, a white flash of lightning streaked across the sky, illuminating the dark expanse for just a moment. Will saw the cattails bending, snapping, under the weight of the rain, the pitted surface of the lake, the water on the road before it was all swallowed up in the shadows again. From somewhere in the distance came the deep rumble of thunder, and he could hear the cypress trees groaning ominously in the howling wind.

The storm had picked up since it had started. The wind was stronger, it was raining harder...

Will forced himself to ignore that fact, what it meant, as he pushed the rolling door up and climbed into the bed of the truck.

He quickly unlocked the gurney's brakes and rolled it to the very edge of the open hold. He waited until he was sure it wouldn't move before he hopped out. Then he grabbed the cold metal rails and carefully lifted the stretcher down from the truck and began to slowly drag it over to the passenger side door. Once he reached it, Will quickly collapsed the gurney and grabbed the door handle, yanking it open.

Mikhail's body had shifted during the drive, but Will still had to tug and pull it quite a bit before he managed to maneuver it to the very edge of the seat. With one last heave, Mikhail came tumbling out of the truck at last, landing with a wet thump in the mud. Will stood there for a moment, panting heavily, trying to catch his breath and shaking the rain from his eyes as he gazed impassively down at the splayed limbs, the open eyes, the slack mouth.

Now came the hard part.

Will rolled Mikhail's body onto the waiting gurney and quickly strapped it down. Decomposition may be slower in water but it still happened. And once it started and the gasses were produced, bodies in water tended to float.

Unless, of course, they were weighed down.

Will knew he didn't have the means to ensure that Mikhail's body was never found - it was inevitable that it eventually would be. And once it was, it would be fairly quick and easy to deduce that homicide had been at play. And then it would be only a matter of time before an investigation was launched. And with everything science was capable of now, how much forensics had advanced even within the last few years, it was possible Will might someday be identified as the killer…

Will knew all that. And while the situation was far from ideal, he also knew there was only so much he could do about it, given what he had. So at this point, his goal wasn't so much as to

make the body and the evidence completely disappear so much as it was to cause as much damage as possible before it was discovered - to give the body enough time to decay, to delay an investigation, to destroy DNA enough to cause confusion and doubt.

Will grabbed the end of the gurney and tugged it forcibly toward himself. Again. Again! Gradually, inch by inch, he pulled the stretcher closer and closer to the water. The wheels caught a few times, halting his progress, and Will had to work quickly to dig them free again each time. When he reached the lake's edge, he stopped. He wouldn't be able to use the wheels anymore once he was in the water - they were sure to get stuck in the muck, would sink under the weight of the water, and once they did, it would create a vacuum that would be nearly impossible for Will to break on his own.

From here on out, he would have to carry it.

Will stood and carefully turned the gurney on its side. Mikhail's body slumped heavily against the straps, but they held, much to Will's relief. Then he firmly planted his feet and grabbed hold of the metals guardrails, hoisting it up like a suitcase.

The muscles in Will's legs and arms strained, his shoulders screamed in protest as he lifted the gurney just high enough to clear the ground. Chest heaving, he took a single, shuffling step into the water.

The lake was so cold that it burned, and the moment the icy water seeped into Will's shoes and socks, his *bones* , he almost abandoned the plan altogether, almost left Mikhail right there on the shore to rot. But Will knew he couldn't do that, not when the body would be so close to the road, not where it could be found so quickly and easily.

He had to get it further out.

He had to keep going.

Panting, Will took another step into the lake. The water touched his knees. His flesh puckered painfully, his muscles shook, and by the glow of the headlights behind him, Will could see the thick fog of his own breath. It didn't matter, he told himself as he took another step, and

then another (mid-thigh now). It didn't matter. None of it mattered if it meant he and Hannibal were free.

The mud was slippery under his feet, and Will stumbled a few times as he made his way further in. By the time the water reached his chest, he had loosened his grip somewhat on the gurney - it felt a little bit lighter now that he had it submerged, and he used the change to his advantage as best he could.

It wasn't until the water touched his chin that he finally stopped, water sloshing unsettlingly close to his nose and mouth.

Tilting his head, Will glanced back toward the shore, to the faint, twin beams of light that just barely managed to cut through the darkness, distant as stars. It was hard to judge just how far out he was from where he was standing, but if Will had to guess, he had to be at least a hundred feet from the truck, maybe more.

He sighed.

It wasn't what he would have chosen to do if given the chance - he was still uncomfortably close to the road, too close, and while the water was deep enough here to completely submerge the body, it was bound to resurface again someday - the water level would fall in the summer when the temperatures soared and the marsh dried up. Someone would spot a suspicious looking shadow and report it to the police. A fisherman's line would catch on the gurney's straps and it would be drawn back into the light. Something would happen. Someone would find Mikhail again one day.

He just hoped that when that day finally came, he and Hannibal would be somewhere far away, and this night would be nothing more than a distant and unpleasant memory for them.

Will hefted the gurney and angled it so that Mikhail's face pointed down, down toward the silt, where the little worms and crayfish and microbes were waiting.

And then he let it go.

Will was careful on his way back to the crossroads - the roads were slick with water, and he slid more than a few times during the drive. And it was dark - there were no street lamps this far out in the country, and the only light he had besides the headlights on the van were the occasional bursts of lightning overhead, impossible to predict, impossible to rely on.

It was just Will, alone in the darkness, alone in the storm.

When he finally reached the junction, he felt the knot in his chest loosen a bit.

He was nearly there.

He was almost home.

If he kept going straight through the four way intersection, Will would eventually reach the house.

But he didn't go straight.

He turned left, away from it, because he couldn't risk keeping the truck any longer than he had to. Not when it was now a crime scene littered with his DNA.

Will continued down that dark and lonely road for a short time (he didn't want to stray too far, after all - he'd have to go back the same way on foot), until he came to a small cluster of trees gathered tantalizingly close to the asphalt. Will eyed them, weighing his different options, and settled for a tree that was a similar girth to the stump they had hit earlier. He double checked his seat belt, backed the car up a short bit, and then shifted gears.

He rammed into the tree with just enough force that the dent wrapped around the bark like an embrace, holding the truck firmly in place. Will winced as the seat belt dug painfully across his chest. He gasped with pain, stars exploding across his vision, as his head whipped forward then back with the impact. He slumped against the steering wheel with a groan, waited for the pain to die back down before he moved again.

Will shut the engine off and opened the car door wide. Wide enough so that the rain came pouring in, soaking the door, the edge of the cushion. He climbed out of his seat. Stepped down to the slightly less-than-solid ground. Then he uncapped one of the bottles of rubbing alcohol and poured it generously over the seats, the floor of the truck.

Will knew it would look suspicious that only the inside of the truck was burned, just like he knew there was no way the truck could completely ignite with the rain coming down as hard as it was, that it would eventually put itself out. But he hoped that no one would think to look too closely for a while. That people would take the empty truck for what it appeared to be at first glance - a vehicle that had been abandoned after a bad accident.

Once he had finished with the first bottle, Will took out the second and poured it over the steering wheel, the shift, the seatbelt buckles, the door handles - anything that either he or Mikhail might have touched - and then wiped them down with his wet jacket, washing away their prints, their discarded cells, their hair, everything.

Then he grabbed the lighter he had taken from Mikhail. Held it out, keeping it inside the dry truck. Flicked it, squinting at the little flame that ignited in his hand.

Then he dropped it.

And that was it.

Mikhail's body was already beginning to rot in Lake Pontchartrain, miles away from his burning van. One cleansed by water, the other baptized with fire, and what little evidence there was to tie Will to Mikail was gone. There were no witnesses, no security camera footage, and very little, if any, DNA left now. Both the body and the truck would eventually be recovered, hopefully (likely) at two very different times, and if Will was really lucky (which he rarely was, but, hey - first time for everything), hopefully so far apart that no one

would think to link the two together. At least not right away. But one day they would be, once Mikhail surfaced, once the truck was discovered, then two separate investigations were launched, two investigations that would eventually be merged into one.

But Will was sure the case was destined to be a cold one. That no one except him would ever know what had really happened on that miserable night.

Will closed the truck's door with his shoulder.

He started to walk.

In the end, the floods weren't nearly as bad as Will had been expecting - only ankle deep, at most. Compared to how it was after Katrina, considering how low New Orleans sat to sea level, how prone it was to flooding anyway, it was nothing.

It was still annoying, trudging eight miles through three inches of ice cold water in the dark. And it was dark. So dark. Will couldn't see more than a few feet in front of him, couldn't see the road at all, could only feel it under his feet as he walked, legs burning, lungs gasping, with only the vaguest idea of where he was, how far he was from the house. Occasionally, lightning would flash, and Will would catch a glimpse of the miles and miles of empty countryside that surrounded him everywhere he turned before it all disappeared again.

He knew he and Hannibal had distant neighbors, had seen their houses whenever they had driven into town, but there was no sign of them now, not so much as a hint of their existence as he walked, and there were a few times during that long trek through the void that Will was seized with panic, convinced he was going the wrong way, that he was lost.

'You're not going the wrong way.' He told himself firmly each time. 'You know you're not. It's a straight shot from the crossroads. It's late, the lights are off because they're sleeping, that's all.'

And Will knew that. Of course he knew that. But it was still hard to find comfort in simple reasoning when he had no physical proof to reinforce it. He was flying blind and solo, he could barely hear anything over the sound of rushing water and pouring rain. He was exhausted. He was afraid. And there seemed to be no end to any of it in sight.

He was actually glad when Abigail suddenly appeared beside him.

“Come on, Will!” She encouraged him, a flicker of movement, a shadow amongst shadows. “Just a little further, come on! You’re almost there!”

“Bullshit!” Will panted back at her. “You have...no idea...where I am...how far...from the house!”

“You’re closer now than when you first started.” She argued. “Come on, don’t give up now!”

“I can...barely stand.” Will told her, stumbling. His legs hurt. His shoulders ached. He could feel his jaw growing tighter and tighter with each passing second, working itself into a lock. “I just need a minute…”

“No, no, no!” Abigail snapped, dipping closer to him, as though to grab him. “You can’t stop, Will! If you do, you won’t get up again!”

“I’m tired.” Will whispered, knowing she would understand what he meant.

There was a small pause.

“I know you are.” She told him sadly. “But you can’t give up. Not now, not like this - your story’s not over yet, Will. There’s still so much you need to do. And what about Hannibal? Hannibal’s still waiting for you. You can’t just leave him alone.”

“Why not?” Will asked. He wanted so badly to cry. Because it wasn’t fair that he should be forced to go on for Hannibal’s sake when he just wanted it to be over, when all he wanted was for the pain to finally stop. Once and for all. “Why can’t I?”

“Because he loves you, you know he does. If you die, it will destroy him.”

“...Maybe,” Will mumbled. “That's for the best.”

“You really think so?”

Will didn’t answer her. He didn’t need to. She already knew.

“Come on, Will.” Abigail said gently. He wished so badly that she was real, that he could reach out and take her hand in his. “Come on…”

It was nice to have her with him all the same, even if he couldn’t touch her, even if she wasn’t real. Just hearing her voice, just feeling like he wasn’t alone anymore, was enough.

“Just a little more, you’re almost there, come on-”

Will had no idea how long he had been walking when a bolt of lightning suddenly burst overhead. The thunder that followed immediately after was deafening, and Will felt the ground shake beneath his feet, felt his bones vibrate and shudder with electricity.

“Shit!” He swore, his jaw clenching, his shoulders seizing.

“You need to hurry!” Abigail told him. Will could see her, in a vague kind of way, gazing worriedly up at the black sky. “That was too close, and with all the water -”

Another flash, a little further away this time, and the world was bathed in eerie blue light for a single, split second. Will heard Abigail draw a small, shaky breath beside him.

“What?”

She shook her head. Or at least, he thought she did. “Nothing. I thought I saw-”

Light again, however quick. Just quick enough for Will to see Abigail’s eyes widen with horror. “Oh, God, Will, don’t stop!” She urged him.

“Why? What’s wrong?”

“She’s here!” Abigail hissed. “Come on, you need to go!”

“Who are you-?” Will began, turning to look over his shoulder as another flash of lightning split the sky, filling it with light.

When he saw her, a cold like nothing Will had ever felt before swept over him.

Her long white dress was trailing in the water as she staggered after them with slow, deliberate steps. Her hair was wet and hung limply in her face, concealing it. Her hand was outstretched, pale fingers reaching for him…

And then the dark descended - hard, fast, absolute, like the slamming of a door - and the crash of thunder that echoed in its wake shook Will to his core.

With a gasp, he whipped around and took off down the road as fast as he could, water splashing loudly at his heels.

“Keep going! Run!” Abigail shouted from somewhere just behind him. “Don’t stop! Whatever you do, Will, don’t stop!”

Will had no intention to. Because for reasons he couldn’t quite explain, he knew, knew like he knew his own name, knew it in his aching heart, the twisted labyrinth of his soul, that if she managed to reach him, if she so much as touched him, everything he was, who he was, would be lost forever.

There was a stabbing, shooting pain in his lungs. His legs felt as if they were on fire.

But he didn’t stop.

Lightning flashed. Will risked another glance.

She was still there. Exactly the same distance from him she had been before. Her arm extended for him…

Blind again. Still running.

“Run! Run! GO!”

Barely breathing. Throat tight with terror. Heart fit to burst.

“Will, run!”

He never saw it coming. How could he? Between the darkness and the water, how would he have ever known it was there?

When Will's foot caught the edge of a pothole, there was a moment, a terrifying moment, as he was falling forward, of disconnect. Of a total loss of proprioception, of not knowing where he was compared to everything else. He felt untethered, suspended, as if he didn't really exist at all.

He was reassured he absolutely did a moment later, when he came crashing back to earth.

The moment his face hit the water, when it filled his mouth and nose, choking him.

Will sputtered and gasped, desperate for air.

"What are you doing?!" Abigail screamed at him. "Get up! GET UP!"

What did she think he was doing? Didn't she know he was trying?

Will coughed, struggling to push himself to his feet. His hands were stinging - he was pretty sure he had scraped them when he fell, that they were bleeding. His legs were threatening to give out.

But he managed to stagger to his feet somehow, seconds, minutes, hours later, and he turned to look behind him as another vein of lightning tore through the clouds.

She was still there. Standing eerily still, just staring at him through the dark curtain of her hair.

Smiling at him.

Will saw her just long enough to get a glimpse of her, just long enough to know she was there, and then he was plunged into darkness once more.

There was a faint rush of air that breezed past his cheek, a suggestion of movement, a hint that there was someone there with him.

And then, an intake of breath.

“You’re not ready.” A voice, the most beautiful voice he had ever heard in his life, whispered in his ear.

A thin exhale.

A sigh.

“Soon.” She promised him.

When the lightning flashed again, she was gone.

Only Will and Abigail remained.

—-------

The lightning stopped.

The dark prevailed.

And Will walked, unsure if it was better or worse.

He had gone for so long without light that seeing it again was almost a shock.

When he first saw it - faint and orange and flickering in the distant sitting room window - it took Will a moment to realize what it was, and when he did, he stopped, staring out across the darkness, numb to the rain that continued to pour over him, no longer bothered by his numb fingers and toes, uncaring of the pain. He blinked, wondering if it was another hallucination.

“It’s real.” Abigail reassured him. “It’s real, Will. Come on.”

With a small nod, Will forced himself to take another, wobbling step.

He had made it. It was right there, Hannibal was right there, waiting. The nightmare would be over soon.

Now that he could actually see the house, now that he was so close, every step he took toward it seemed far too small, as if he would never reach it, as if he wasn’t actually getting any closer…

It felt like an entire lifetime had passed by the time he finally made it to the driveway.

His legs were shaking so hard that Will thought he was going to collapse as he slowly climbed the porch steps. He gripped the railing hard, felt the bones of his knuckles shift under his skin as he hauled himself those last few feet to the front door. Raising his aching arm, pressure welling in his damaged shoulder, Will brought his fist down weakly against it, and then once more for good measure.

A second passed. Another. Will nearly wept at the silence that answered him.

And then he heard the soft sound of quick footsteps from the other side of the door, and the lock turning. Will had to grab the frame to steady himself when the door suddenly swung open.

Hannibal's face seemed unnaturally pale as it emerged from the shadows of the house, staring at him.

"Will!" He breathed, relieved, as he swept Will into his arms, pulling him against his solid, warm frame and holding him tight.

Will felt his throat tighten and he screwed his eyes shut, desperate to contain the howl that was threatening to erupt from him as he clung to Hannibal. After everything that had happened, after everything that had almost happened, what could have happened, everything that could have gone wrong, to be back in Hannibal's arms was overwhelming.

He was on the verge of passing out when Hannibal suddenly grabbed his arms and pulled him away, glaring at him.

"Where have you been?!" He hissed. "I have been calling you for hours - why didn't you answer your phone?"

"Phone's dead." Will told him. He felt curiously light-headed and detached, almost as if none of what was happening was actually occurring. For a split second, he worried it might not be, but then Hannibal's hands tightened painfully around him, and Will knew it was real.

"What happened?" Hannibal demanded. It was strange seeing him like this, so angry, so clearly worried, when the majority of the time he was a living mask, impossible to read, displaying just the slightest hint of emotion that was almost always a lie.

"Long story." Will mumbled, trying to press against him again and whining when Hannibal wouldn't let him.

" *What happened* ?"

“Hannibal, please not now.” Will begged him, close to tears. “Please, please, I’m so tired, I just want to sleep, please!”

As soon as he heard the sob threatening to spill over, Hannibal grabbed Will and hoisted him into his arms. “Shh.” He murmured, carrying Will into the house. “Shh, it’s alright, Will.”

Will let his head fall against Hannibal’s chest, eyes fluttering shut.

“No, no.” Hannibal said sternly, jostling him slightly. “Stay awake.”

Reluctantly, Will opened his eyes as Hannibal strode down the hall, through the kitchen, to his room. There were dozens of candles everywhere, strategically placed and each one lit, bathing the house in a soft, warm glow.

“Why’s it so dark?” Will asked Hannibal as he brought him into the master bathroom. “Turn the lights on.”

“The power’s out.”

“Oh.” Will said, blinking heavily as Hannibal set him on the vanity.

“You’re freezing.” Hannibal fussed, propping him against the mirror. He took Will’s hands in his own, cupping them protectively as he examined his red fingertips. “We need to get you warm.”

Will nodded vaguely, watching as Hannibal brought his fingers to his lips and kissed them, his hot breath almost painful against his icy, deadened skin. When Hannibal released him and began to unfasten the buttons on his jacket, Will tried to help, but Hannibal stopped him.

“Let me, Will.”

He was too tired to protest. He watched with half-lidded eyes as Hannibal's deft fingers moved down the line of buttons, leaning forward slightly when he got the last one undone so that Hannibal could peel the jacket off his shoulders. Once it was off, he thought he saw Hannibal pause, a puzzled frown on his face as he felt the jacket before he tossed it aside. It landed somewhere in the corner with a loud, wet smack, a loud, suspicious thunk.

"Did you hit your head?" Hannibal asked him, frowning at the gash on his forehead as he pulled off Will's shirt. Will nodded, and Hannibal grabbed one of the nearby candles, bringing it closer so he could see him better.

"Look straight ahead." He instructed him, shining the light in Will's pupils, checking them. Will winced slightly at the bright light so close to his aching eyes, his pounding head, and Hannibal's frown deepened. He set the candle back down. "Follow my finger."

When he finished, Hannibal sighed. "I think you have a concussion."

"Can't say I'm surprised." Will mumbled.

"Do you know where you are?"

"The house." The only reason he didn't roll his eyes was because he knew it would hurt.

"Good. What about the date?"

Will thought for a moment. "February…11th."

"Very good." Hannibal praised him with a slight smile. "Now, can you tell me your birthday?"

“March 18th.”

“It’s coming up soon - a little more than a month away.” Hannibal pointed out as he unlaced Will’s shoes and pried them off. “Is there anything you would like?”

Will shrugged, a sluggish roll of his shoulders. “Not really.”

Hannibal looked up at him. The fact that Will had had the chance to answer him sarcastically - a new brain, a better friend - and didn’t take it seemed to worry him more than anything else he had said. “No? That’s a shame.” He said after a moment. “I suppose I’ll have to get creative then.”

Will shrugged again. Answering felt like too much effort. His eyes fluttered, the lids dipping low.

Hannibal tapped him gently on the cheek. “Stay with me, Will.”

Will dragged them open again with great effort, watching as Hannibal undid his jeans. It was only when he reached for his boxers that he finally reacted.

“No, no!” He complained, trying to squirm away.

“They’re soaked, Will.” Hannibal reminded him, pushing his hands easily aside. “And I’ve seen you naked before. Remember?”

Yes, unfortunately. But that didn’t make Will any less uncomfortable with the idea. He looked away, embarrassed, as Hannibal dragged the fabric down his hips, feeling unbearably vulnerable as he sat, naked, cold, and exhausted, shivering pathetically in front of Hannibal. He opened his eyes when he heard the sound of a faucet turning, water running, and turned to find that Hannibal had moved away from him over to the enormous claw-foot tub. He dipped his hand under the stream, testing it.

“What are you doing?” Will asked him, nervous.

“I told you, Will. You’re too cold. We need to warm you up.”

“No, please!” Will whimpered as Hannibal approached him again. “Please, just let me sleep!”

“Shh. It won’t take long.” Hannibal promised as he pulled Will to his feet. “Come on.”

Will clung to him tightly as Hannibal helped him to the tub. He gasped the moment his foot touched the water.

It wasn’t even that warm - too hot and it would have sent him into shock - but after spending the last few hours in agonizing cold, it felt scalding.

“It’s alright.” Hannibal soothed as he lowered him down. “You’ll get used to it in a second.”

Will nodded, almost frantically, as he settled himself. Once he had, Hannibal took the pitcher he kept on the vanity and filled it with water.

“Tilt your head back.”

Childlike, Will obeyed, and couldn’t help but wince when Hannibal poured it over him. Hannibal nudged him, and he raised his head again, watching as Hannibal grabbed a nearby bottle of shampoo. He squeezed a generous dollop into his palm, and began to work it into Will’s hair.

“Are you going to tell me what happened, now?” Hannibal asked him quietly after a moment. Will swallowed.

“I was closing the bar.” He said quietly. “I was getting ready to leave when a man came in. He said he was lost. That he was looking for the interstate…He asked me if I could help.”

It was hard to focus, hard to stay awake, as Hannibal’s hands massaged his scalp.

“I gave him directions. Drew him a map. And then we both left.”

“Head back, Will.”

Will kept his eyes closed as Hannibal rinsed the shampoo from his hair.

“And then what?”

“Truck wouldn’t start.” Will mumbled. Hannibal had taken a soft cloth and was now washing his face, scrubbing the dried blood from his brow. “I think he must have done something to it before he came in. The man - Mikhail - offered me a ride.”

“And you said yes?” Hannibal growled, furious, disbelieving.

“My phone was about to die.” Will told him. “I didn’t know what else to do.”

“You could have called me. I would have come and got you.”

“Having you come and get me would have put you in danger.” Will said, voice no more than a whisper but echoing loudly across the tiles. “You’ve never been to the bar before - you wouldn’t have known where to go. The roads were going to flood. You wouldn’t have been able to reach me if something went wrong - it wasn’t worth the risk-”

Hannibal didn't warn him this time when he dumped the pitcher over his head, and Will sputtered before Hannibal pressed a dry towel to his face.

"I will always come for you, Will." He said sternly. "No matter what, no matter the risks, I will always do whatever I can to help you. Do you understand?"

Will nodded, panting. Hannibal squeezed him reassuringly.

"Stand up."

"No!" Will begged him, because just the thought of standing, wet and dripping in the open air, was torture by itself. "Please, no!"

"I need to wash you, Will." Hannibal said, unmoving. "You smell like you've been swimming in a bog - you'll get sick if I don't. Come on, stand up."

So saying, he tugged Will to his feet.

It was even worse than Will imagined, his skin curling into tight puckers, shivering miserably as Hannibal took the cloth again and began to lather his shoulders.

"I take it this man did not have the best intentions for you?" Hannibal asked, sweeping over his chest and down his arms.

Will shook his head. "N-no!" He stuttered, pulling his arms close to his body again as soon as Hannibal released them. "He-he lied. He wa-wasn't gonna take m-me home. He m-missed the turn…wouldn't t-turn around."

Hannibal nodded, as if he expected this, and dragged the cloth over Will's stomach.

“Who was he, really?” He asked. “What did he want?”

“He was o-o-one of Y-Yuri’s.” Will said through chattering teeth, hugging himself desperately for some small sliver of warmth. Hannibal’s hand stopped moving.

“Yuri’s?” He echoed softly, and Will nodded.

“He said we owed them a lot of money.” He managed. “And that he was taking me back to Atlanta because he knew you would pay anything to get me back.”

Hannibal set the cloth aside, and gently took Will’s face in his warm hands. Will moaned, nuzzling into them.

“Will, listen to me. This is very important : what exactly did he say to you?”

“I d-don’t know.” Will told him. He was so tired, he was so cold. He would say anything, do anything, if it meant he could just sleep. “He said something like ‘we cost them a lot of money with our little stunt’, and that his boss was very interested in meeting us.”

“His boss? Did he mean Yuri?” Hannibal asked.

He sounded confused.

“No, I don’t think so.” Will said, shaking his head. “He said Yuri didn’t want anything from us.”

Hannibal blinked, and then slowly released Will again before he picked up the washcloth again, pressing it back against Will’s navel. “I see. And how did you get away?”

“I grabbed the wheel.” Will said, trying to ignore the pleasure that was stirring low in his belly. “We spun off the road. I-I shot him. I think I must have squeezed the trigger by accident.”

“Hmm.” Hannibal hummed. “I was wondering where you got a gun, Will.” He said, nodding to the pile of clothes in the corner.

Will’s blood ran cold. He had forgotten about it. “It was his.” He lied quickly. “I took it from him.”

“Oh? When?” Hannibal asked lightly.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

Will thought quickly. “After I grabbed the wheel.”

Hannibal didn’t answer him right away. “I’m curious.” He said, his hand dipping lower and lower. “How you managed to grab the gun and get your finger around the tigger so quickly, Will.”

Will gasped when Hannibal cupped him with the cloth and began to gently stroke him up and down. “I-I don’t know!” He panted. It was hard to think clearly with what Hannibal was doing. “It all happened so fast.”

Hannibal hummed again and took his hand away briefly before plunging it back between Will’s legs. He yelped, trying to twist away from him, but Hannibal held him firm.

“You’re lucky to be alive, Will.” He said quietly, moving behind Will so that he could get his rear and back. Will nodded, quiet as Hannibal finished washing him.

“Sit down, darling.” Hannibal commanded gently, and Will sank gratefully back into the warm bathwater with a sigh. “Now stick your leg out for me.” He waited until Will had done so before he spoke again. “What did you do with the body?”

“Dumped it in the swamp.” Will mumbled, eyes slipping shut. He heard Hannibal chuckle.

“Did you?” He asked, sounding amused. “Interesting.”

“’How so?” Will grumbled irritably.

“That you would dispose of him the same way your mother tried to dispose of you.”

Will opened his eyes. Glared at him. “I didn’t try to drown him.” He snapped. “I hadn’t even planned on killing him the way I did - it was an accident.”

“Of course.” Hannibal said indulgently, as he finished washing Will’s foot.

“It was!” Will insisted.

“So tell me, Will: how would you have killed him? If given your way?” Hannibal asked as he drew Will’s other leg out from the water.

Will stayed silent, and Hannibal didn’t push him for an answer.

“What about the car?” He said instead.

“Ditched it up the road.”

“I hope you wiped it down before you did.”

“It’s nice to know you think I’m an idiot.”

“I think nothing of the sort.” Hannibal reassured him, releasing him at last. “I just was worried you weren’t thinking straight with your concussion.”

“Oh ye of little faith.” Will drawled.

“If only you knew.” Hannibal said with a flash of his sharp teeth. He reached down and took the plug from the drain before moving away to grab a towel. He held it open for Will. “Step out, sweetheart.” He encouraged.

Will was shaking as Hannibal folded the towel around his dripping form and began to quickly rub him dry. Miserable, he closed his eyes, swaying on his feet.

“I just wanna sleep.”

“I know.” Hannibal told him, taking a second towel and draping it over his head. “As soon as we get you dressed, you can.”

Will stumbled on unsteady feet as Hannibal led him to the bedroom and sat him on the bed.

“It’s so cold.” He moaned as Hannibal pushed the damp towel off his shoulders. “Why is it so cold?”

“No power, remember?” Hannibal reminded him as he pulled one of his own sweaters - ridiculously soft, ridiculously too big - over Will’s head. “No heat.”

Will bit back a sob at that.

“Don’t worry.” Hannibal said, feeding his feet into a pair of thick sleep pants and hoisting him to his feet so that he could pull them up over his hips. “I’ve already taken care of it.”

Will was too tired to ask what he meant as Hannibal looped an arm around his waist and ushered him from the room. He felt almost delirious with exhaustion, like he had all those years ago when the encephalitis was ravaging his brain, as they made their way slowly down the hall toward the sitting room. When they finally reached it and Will saw what was waiting for them inside, he wondered for a moment if what he was seeing *was* real, if the encephalitis was back after all.

Hannibal had taken the couch and chairs and pushed them aside, clearing a large space on the rug in front of the hearth, where a large fire was crackling cheerfully. In their place, he had gathered a collection of different cushions and pillows and blankets, arranging them into a kind of nest in the middle of the room. Will stared at it as Hannibal guided him over to their makeshift bed and carefully lowered him down.

“Shh.” He said, pulling a blanket over him. “It’s alright, Will. Everything’s alright. You can sleep now.”

And he might have - his eyes were so heavy, he was so very tired - if Hannibal hadn’t straightened then and pulled off his shirt.

“What are you doing?” Will asked, all thoughts of sleep forgotten.

“Body heat.” Hannibal explained simply, shucking his pants. “It works better the more direct the exposure is.”

He didn’t seem even remotely bothered by the fact that Will was so openly staring up at him. Didn’t seem the least bit embarrassed by the fact that Will was studying him so closely.

‘He’s glorious.’ Will thought feverishly, watching Hannibal’s muscles ripple as he sank down to his knees beside him, the shadows that played around their hills and valleys in the firelight.

‘He’s like a god.’

Hannibal was leaning over him, pushing his hair away from his forehead so he could check the cut there. He frowned when he finally looked over and met Will’s eyes, saw his expression. He was so close, his face just inches from Will’s.

“Are you alright?” He whispered, and Will nodded back at him. His frown deepened, and he cupped Will’s cheek. “Are you sure?”

Will hesitated for just a moment.

“Yes. I’m sure.” He said, lifting his head to close the short distance between them.

When he pressed his lips to Hannibal’s, it was unlike anything he had ever felt before.

It felt like fireworks.

It felt electric.

It felt like coming home.

It felt right.

And when Hannibal kissed him back, when he slipped under the covers and sank against him, it felt like everything.

—-------

Hannibal shuddered, groaned, and then went still. Will could feel his heart as it pounded against his - it was strong and steady, while his own felt small and quick.

Will panted, gazing up at Hannibal as he pulled away from him, dizzy with exhaustion, weak with pleasure.

Hannibal bent his head and touched their foreheads together.

“Will.” He breathed, peppering his face with reverent kisses. “ *Aš tave myliu...tu tobulas...tu esi viskas…* ”

Will had never heard anything like the words he was hearing now, and could only assume that it was Lithuanian, that Hannibal was speaking to him in his native tongue. He had no idea what he was saying, wasn't sure if he wanted to know, and was too tired to ask anyway.

His eyes fluttered shut as Hannibal gently drew him close and rolled them so that Will was lying comfortably on his side, his head cradled against Hannibal’s chest. He could feel Hannibal’s hands moving up and down his body, touching him, exploring every inch of him, and his lips were buried in his curls, kissing him as if he couldn’t stop himself.

“Go to sleep, mylimasis.” He heard Hannibal whisper as he was drifting off. “Go to sleep…”

Will sighed.

He wondered if it was happiness he was feeling, if this was what it felt like, and decided it was more than just that.

‘Oh, God.’ Will found himself thinking right before he fell asleep. ‘I think I’ve fallen in love with him…’

Chapter End Notes

According to Google Translate (which is always right and never, ever wrong about anything):

"As tave myliu...tu tobulas...tu esi viskas"

Means something along the lines of of "I love you...you're perfect...you're everything."

Guess I Love Living in the Sin

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Will woke, he was alone, pressed against a soft pillow and buried beneath a pile of blankets he couldn't remember falling asleep under. He blinked, frowning up at the pale, gray light that painted the walls - the kind that promised overcast skies. Whether it was morning or afternoon, Will wasn't sure and didn't particularly care to find out - he didn't want to be awake just yet. He wasn't ready for it, wasn't ready to face the day after what had happened in the dark the night before, and for a while, he lay cradled in the soft warmth of the blankets and pillows that surrounded him, trying to will himself back to sleep and failing miserably.

Eventually, with a frustrated huff, he sat up, clenching one of the blankets tightly around his bare shoulders, and looked across the room.

It was empty.

So why did he feel like he was being watched?

His spine tingled, and Will slowly turned his head…

He found Hannibal perched on one of the armchairs behind him, unnaturally still and staring at him.

He jumped, startled. "Jesus!"

Hannibal smirked back at him.

“Good morning, Will. I was wondering when you’d finally wake up.” He said, uncrossing his legs and dropping down beside Will on the bed. He reached out, wrapping a large hand around the back of his head and drawing him close, so that he could press a tender kiss to his cheek. “I missed you.”

“Why? I didn’t go anywhere.” Will pointed out grumpily, blushing furiously.

“On the contrary.” Hannibal purred, trailing his lips from Will’s scar to the corner of his mouth. “You went to one of the few places that I cannot follow.”

Will considered these words.

“...I’m gonna assume that sounded a lot better in your head.” He said sarcastically.

“It sounded exactly the same as it did aloud.”

“What, creepy as hell?”

Hannibal sat back, regarding Will with a fond smile. “Will you always be this difficult, mylimasis?”

“I had planned on it.”

Hannibal’s eyes crinkled. “Good.” He said simply, bestowing a final kiss on Will’s forehead before he pushed himself to his feet. Will watched him as he drifted over to the fireplace, where a large dutch oven was suspended over the flames. He lifted the lid, checked the contents inside, and then replaced the lid again with a satisfied nod.

“What’s that?” Will asked him, looking at the two bowls, the spoons, the carton of raspberries, the jar of honey, and the sugar bowl that had been laid across the hearth.

“Breakfast.” Hannibal said as he sauntered toward the couch, where his Gladstone bag was sitting. “I hope you’re hungry.”

“Like it would really matter if I wasn’t.” Will mumbled, shifting uncomfortably on the bed as Hannibal came back to him, bag in hand. “What are you doing?”

Hannibal blinked at him. “I’d like to examine you, Will.”

“No.”

Hannibal sighed and set the bag down. “Don’t be difficult, Will.”

“You literally just told me to never not be difficult.” Will snapped, edging away from him.

“I meant,” Hannibal said, pulling out a blood pressure cuff, a stethoscope, and a thermometer and laying them out on the blankets. “That I hoped you would never stop making me work to earn your love. Not risk not having you at all.”

“I’m not gonna die from being out in the rain for a few hours.” Will said, rolling his eyes.

Hannibal raised a silver eyebrow at him. “You’re right. You’re not.”

So saying, he reached out and pulled the blanket away from Will.

“Hey!” Will protested, cowering against the sudden rush of winter morning air against his naked skin. “Give that back!”

“You’ll get it back as soon as I'm done.” Hannibal promised, grabbing his stethoscope. “Hold still.”

Will jerked away as soon as the icy bell touched him. “It’s cold!”

Hannibal withdrew it and brought it to his mouth, blowing heavily against the metal to warm it up. “The faster you cooperate, Will, the faster you get your blanket back.” He said, bringing the stethoscope back to his chest. “Now be a good boy and behave for me.”

Mumbling darkly to himself, fuming under his breath, glaring and shivering, Will sat still and allowed Hannibal to check him.

“Deep breath in.” Hannibal instructed, frowning as he listened to the air stir deep within Will’s lungs before he moved to Will’s back. “And exhale...good.”

He drew the stethoscope away. “Your lungs are clear.” He said, looping the stethoscope around his neck. He took the blood pressure cuff and wrapped it around Will’s arm. “But I still want to check them again later. Pneumonia can set in very quickly.”

Will didn’t bother to answer him as he began to inflate the cuff, pressing the stethoscope bell back now to the crook of his arm. He doubted it would make much difference if he told Hannibal that catching pneumonia from being out in the rain was an old wives’ tale.

“...Blood pressure’s normal.” Hannibal muttered, more to himself than to Will, before putting the cuff back in his bag. He sounded almost disappointed. Then he picked up the thermometer and tapped it against Will’s tightly closed lips. “Open up.”

“Absolutely not.” Will growled through his teeth. “No way am I letting you put that or anything else inside me.”

“You certainly had no problem with letting me put things inside you last night.” Hannibal reminded him lightly, smirking slightly when Will sputtered. “And I assure you, this will be

far less...invasive."

"If I do, will you stop?"

"I make no promises."

Rolling his eyes, Will opened his mouth, and Hannibal slipped the little glass rod under his tongue.

"Two minutes." He said happily, turning away from Will and back to the dutch oven behind him. He grabbed one of the bowls and spoons and then lifted the pot lid, scooping up a generous portion of oatmeal. "I put the perishables in a cooler on the porch." Hannibal told him, topping the steaming contents with chunks of berries and drizzling it with honey and sugar. "Hopefully, it will keep until the power comes back on."

"Mmm." Will hummed around the thermometer as Hannibal prepared the second bowl. When he finished, he brought the two over to Will and set them down between them. He pulled the thermometer from Will's mouth and squinted at the mercury line. He frowned when he saw the reading.

"What?"

"Ninety-nine point nine." Hannibal said gravely, as if he had just sentenced Will to death.

"Oh, come *on* ." Will groaned, rolling his eyes when Hannibal set the thermometer down and pressed his hand worriedly against his forehead. "It's off by one degree. I'm fine! It's probably because I was just under a bunch of blankets-"

Hannibal ignored him, and cupped his cheeks, trying to judge how warm they were, before moving his hands to the lymph nodes in Will's neck. "There's drainage." He said quietly, rolling the little bumps under the pads of his fingers.

“There is *not* . You’re imagining it-”

“Nevertheless.” Hannibal said over Will. “I think it would be best if you stayed inside today so I can keep an eye on you.”

“Oh, darn, ‘cause after spending all night in the freezing rain, back outside was the first place I was hoping to go today.”

Hannibal tapped him on the nose. A rebuke.

“Eat your breakfast, Will.” Was all he said in response.

Will took the bowl he offered him, grabbed the spoon, but he didn’t eat. He couldn’t.

“Listen.” He said, avoiding Hannibal’s eyes as he pushed the oats around. “There’s something I need to talk to you about.”

“Whatever it is, I’m sure it can wait until after you’ve finished your meal.”

“No.” Will said firmly, afraid that if he waited any longer, he would either forget or lose his nerve. “We need to talk about it now.”

Hannibal sighed. “I assume this has to do with what happened last night?” He asked. “With Yuri’s...henchman, shall we say?”

“Yes.” Will confirmed, fingers curled painfully tight around his spoon, trying to hold on to something solid. Something that would ground him. “Hannibal...we’ve stayed here for too long. We need to leave.”

“I’ve told you, Will. I can’t leave until I find someone who is both trustworthy enough and skilled enough to make a passport-”

“Hannibal, you’ve had a *month* to look and you haven’t found anybody!”

“And do you have any idea how long it took me to find Yuri?” Hannibal asked. “Three months, Will. And look how well that turned out.”

“That’s not the point!” Will cried. “The point is, we’ve run out of time! Yuri, or whoever’s in charge, was able to find us - they’ve already sent one person to come after us and they’ll send others. Hell, what’s to stop them from calling the FBI and tipping them off about us? We can’t stay here anymore!”

“They wouldn’t do that.” Hannibal said calmly, lifting another spoonful of oats to his mouth. “This is far too personal for them to involve the FBI.”

Will glared at him. “Is that supposed to make me feel *better* ?” He spat incredulously.

“It’s merely a statement of fact.” Hannibal said with a shrug.

“Fine!” Will snarled. “The FBI’s not an issue - but Yuri is! You can’t tell me we don’t have to worry about him!”

Hannibal did something strange then with his lip - almost as if he were about to bite it but changed his mind at the last moment. “Will, do you really think I would put you in danger?”

Will hesitated, thinking back to the last conversation he’d had with Chiyoh before she left.

We can’t stay here forever. Hannibal knows that.

I'm sure he does…But I'm not sure that he cares enough about the risks of staying to try and leave anytime soon…I think…when it comes to you, Hannibal has blind spots…

"I think," He said slowly, "If you had your way, we would never leave. We would stay here. Just the two of us. Forever."

Hannibal exhaled through his nose and then bent forward to kiss Will's forehead. "This isn't what I want for you, Will." He whispered, nuzzling against him. "You deserve the world, and I intend to give it to you. But I can't do that while we're stuck here. While I'm stuck here."

"So let's leave." Will begged him, eyes darting frantically back and forth across Hannibal's face, searching for some small emotion, some hint, of what he was thinking. "We can go somewhere else - anywhere else - and we can find someone to make an ID for you there."

Hannibal didn't answer him right away.

"Just give me a little more time." He said after a while. "Please, just a little longer, Will. I'm sure I can find someone here."

"Hannibal-"

"One month." Hannibal asked, and it was the closest he had ever sounded to pleading. "One month, Will, and if I can't find anyone, then I promise, I *promise* you, we'll leave. Okay?"

Will hesitated.

Every instinct he had was screaming at him to get out, to get out now! that there was an unseen threat creeping steadily closer and closer, a noose that was tightening slowly around his neck, that if he stayed, everything he cared about was sure to be destroyed…

But he couldn't leave. Not yet. Not when he had promised people he would stay. He had to wait a little longer, until Ronny was back on his feet, until he could say goodbye to Nadine and thank her properly for all her help...

He sighed.

"Okay." He agreed slowly, reluctantly. "One month. That's it. And if anything goes wrong before then, we leave immediately."

Hannibal nodded. "Of course, mylimasis." He sat back. "Now, please, Will. Eat."

Will raised the spoon to his lips with trembling fingers.

It tasted like ash.

But he ate it anyway.

And the entire time he did, Will wondered why Hannibal was so reluctant to leave.

…Why he was so eager to stay…what he was hiding…

What was he so desperate to avoid?

—-------

The power came back on a few hours later, much to Hannibal's delight, and that night they cooked dinner in the oven instead of over a fire.

By nightfall, the water had begun to recede, and Will called a tow truck for his car the next day.

“Son, you got any enemies?” The mechanic asked him when he went to pick it up. “Jealous girlfriend or something?”

“Or something.” Will said, following him over to his truck, glancing back at the window that separated the garage from the shop’s lobby, where he could see Hannibal talking with the receptionist. Or at least...the receptionist was talking. Hannibal was looking at her with a decidedly unimpressed expression, eyes narrowed and mouth set in a tight line...

Will felt a small, sharp stab of irritation at the sight, knowing exactly what it promised, that he would have to be quick if he didn’t want a disaster on his hands.

“Someone cut your ignition wire.” The mechanic explained, drawing Will’s attention away from Hannibal and showing him the clean edge of the broken wire he had replaced. “Cut, you hear me? This wasn’t an accident, this wasn’t just good old-fashioned wear-and-tear. This was deliberate.”

Will couldn’t muster up the energy to look surprised, and the mechanic frowned when he saw his expression.

“You know who did this, don’t cha?”

“I have a pretty good idea.” Will told him, thinking of Mikhail’s wide and lifeless blue eyes staring up at him as he tugged his body to the lake’s edge, the way he sank so swiftly under the water the second he let him go…

“Take my advice then, kid - call the police. ‘Cause if this person tries something like this again, you might not be so lucky the next time - they might cut your brakes. Something really dangerous.”

“Trust me.” Will said, taking his keys back. “It won’t happen again.”

When he went back to the lobby, he found Hannibal exactly as he’d left him - still staring at the receptionist the way a snake would eye a particularly plump and unfortunately oblivious mouse.

“Don’t even think about it.” He hissed, grabbing Hannibal’s arm and tugging him away. “Come on, let’s go. God, I can’t take you *anywhere* …”

“Do you know what day it is?” Hannibal asked him at breakfast. He said it casually, like it didn’t really matter.

Will tensed as soon as he said it, suspicious of his tone.

“...The fourteenth.” He said slowly, wondering why he wanted to know.

“Ah, so it is.” Hannibal said, swirling his coffee as if it were wine and staring down into the dark depths of his cup. Avoiding Will’s eyes. Shy. “February the 14th.”

It took Will an embarrassingly long time to figure out what he was talking about.

“No.”

“‘No’ what, Will?”

“Whatever it is you want.” Will snapped. “The answer is no.”

“I was simply wondering if you would like to go out for dinner tonight.” Hannibal said with a shrug.

“Oh, yeah, ‘cause that ended so well the last time.”

“I personally enjoyed the way it ended immensely.” Hannibal smirked. “Your deception was nothing short of poetry, my cunning boy.”

“You know, according to Dante, there’s a special place in hell reserved for flatterers.”

“My dear, I assure you, I’m being entirely sincere. And even if I wasn’t, I think we can both agree that I’ve done far worse than flatter.”

Will laughed, and Hannibal flashed a small smile before he grew serious again.

“If you are uncomfortable with going out somewhere for dinner,” He said, “I can make you something special here - whatever you want.”

Will fiddled with a fray in his napkin. “I’m not...it’s just that...we...are we...Valentine’s Day is for couples. Lovers.”

“Yes.” Hannibal agreed slowly.

“Is that what we are?” Will asked.

Hannibal raised an eyebrow. “I would say so, yes.”

“No, I mean...” But Will struggled to put what he was trying to ask into words. “Never mind. Forget I said anything.”

Hannibal was silent, studying him intently. Will had to force himself not to look away.

“I’ve loved you from the moment I first laid eyes on you, Will.” Hannibal said quietly after a while. “And I’ve spent every moment since trying to win your heart. And there were a few times over the years that I thought I had it. But I was always wrong.”

Will looked away then, remembering with painful clarity the night Hannibal had gutted him - the same way Will had gutted him. He remembered the morning he had woken up safe in Hannibal’s hands after nearly dying at Mason Verger’s. Remembered the first time he saw Hannibal again after all those years apart...

“You can’t blame me for wanting to celebrate, Will.” Hannibal continued quietly. “What happened the other night…it was everything I had ever hoped for.”

Will heaved a sigh, knowing he couldn’t, wouldn’t, refuse.

“Fine, just...keep it simple, okay? Nothing over-the-top - just dinner. Can you do that?”

“Of course, Will.” Hannibal said, brightening immediately. “If that’s what makes you happy.”

Will seriously doubted that he and Hannibal had the same idea of what qualified as ‘over-the-top’, but he kept this opinion to himself. Partly because he knew saying so would be a complete waste of time and breath, but also because…

Because there was just something about the look on Hannibal’s face - something about the soft smile playing on his lips, the happy gleam in his eyes - that Will couldn’t quite bring

himself to crush.

He sighed again, wondering what he had gotten himself into and knowing he would probably regret it.

Hannibal banned Will from entering the kitchen after lunch.

“But I have to go through the kitchen to get to your room and the bathroom!” Will whined, trying to slip past him. “Come on, I need to go!”

”Use the bathroom upstairs then.” Hannibal said, refusing to budge.

“Dinner’s hours away! What are you even *doing* in there?” Will asked suspiciously, trying to peer over his shoulder and falling miserably short.

“Never ask.” Hannibal said with a smirk, gently pushing him away. “It spoils the surprise. Now off you go.”

“Fine.” Will growled, turning around and stalking away. “I guess I’ll just piss off the porch then.”

“Whatever you prefer, dear.”

Hannibal had told him that dinner would be ready at seven, and as the hour drew closer and closer, Will found himself growing inexplicably more and more nervous.

‘What is the matter with you?’ He thought as he pulled a dress shirt from his wardrobe with shaking hands and held it up to himself in the mirror. He grimaced. Tossed it aside. Pulled out another. ‘It’s just dinner with Hannibal. You’ve done it dozens of times before - it’s not like anything’s really changed...’

Liar.

Everything had changed, and he knew it.

_____

By the time Will came downstairs for dinner, the trembling in his hands had progressed to his knees, and his stomach fluttered anxiously as he made his way down the hall on shaky legs.

He had changed his clothes three times before he’d finally given up and chose a basic, blue button down and a pair of dark gray slacks. He knew it wasn’t impressive, that it was far too casual and all wrong for the night, that if he had let Hannibal pick, he would have chosen something stylish and expensive, bold colors and prints that would have complimented his skin tone and eyes. And Will had tried, had tried to select something he thought Hannibal would like, but everything he put on made him feel like he was trying way too hard, that it was obvious he didn’t know what he was doing, that he looked ridiculous - like a little kid playing dress-up.

Or a poor, white trash, working class boy trying to rub elbows with money…

So in the end, he went with something simple, and he told himself that if Hannibal didn't like it, then that was his problem - he had known Will for years, he should know by now that fashion wasn't his forte. That if he really loved Will as much as he claimed he did, it wouldn't matter to him what he wore.

Will just wished he actually believed it.

Hannibal met him outside the kitchen, dressed to the nines in a dark blue suit, white shirt, and a maroon tie and pocket square. He smiled when he saw Will.

"Hello, gorgeous."

Will flushed.

It always made him uncomfortable, being told he was attractive. Will was well aware he had a pretty face and the effect it had on people - how could he not, when for most of his life he had felt strangers' eyes moving over his body, had felt their desire for him? Had looked too close for too long and saw too much? Saw exactly what they would do to him if they could have their way….

And yes, there had been times he had used it to his advantage. Yes, there had been a time when he had used it against Hannibal, but now...things were different now between them. It wasn't a game anymore.

At least...he didn't think it was.

"'M not." Will mumbled, looking away, feeling woefully inadequate standing beside Hannibal in all his splendor. "You look way better."

"Hardly." Hannibal said, and Will could tell that he was smirking, amused by Will's embarrassment. "You, my dear, are simply stunning. As always."

“Please stop.” Will groaned, feeling his blush deepen as he shot Hannibal a pleading look.

Hannibal grinned.

“I‘m sorry, Will.” He said, looking anything but. “I just find it hard not to express my appreciation for beautiful things. And you happen to be the loveliest thing I have *ever* seen. Shall we?”

Will huffed grumpily but allowed Hannibal to slip his arm in his and lead him into the kitchen.

When he saw what Hannibal had prepared, he stopped.

Hannibal glanced over at him. “Something wrong?”

“No, it’s just…” Will trailed off, looking from the single lit candle to the small vase of red roses, to the blue and white china that had already been plated. “You actually kept it simple.”

“Of course.” Hannibal said, inclining his head. “It’s what you asked for. And besides,” He continued, leading Will to his chair. “There is great beauty, great elegance, in simplicity. I find that in this age of decadence, we often overlook its value.”

Will snorted. “You realize you’re probably the worst offender of that, right?”

“I do.” Hannibal admitted with great dignity as he took his own seat. “Tell me, Will: what circle of hell would that put me in, do you think?”

Will smirked, remembering their earlier conversation.

“Take your pick - lust, gluttony, greed. You could argue for any one.” He grinned. “And, of course, we’re not even taking into account all your other sins - anger, heresy, violence, fraud, treachery…honestly, we could stick you pretty much anywhere and you’d be right where you belonged.”

“You think so? Hmm. Well then, if I belong so entirely to Hell, I would say Hell belongs entirely to me.” Hannibal said with a smile, pouring Will a glass of wine. “I suppose that makes me king.”

“You know that’s not a good thing, right?” Will asked, laughing.

“‘Better to reign in Hell, then to serve in Heaven’.” Hannibal quoted.

“But the Devil doesn’t reign in Hell.” Will reminded him. “He’s trapped just like all the other sinners there. And besides, you can’t be the Devil.”

“No?”

“No. The Devil resides in the deepest pit of Hell, reserved for those who have betrayed a benefactor, the greatest of all sins. And as far as I know, you’ve never done that.”

“No, I have not.” Hannibal said lightly as he swirled his drink. “...But you have.”

Will felt his blood run cold, and he looked over in time to meet Hannibal’s dark eyes. He swallowed.

“You’re not my benefactor.” He said after a moment.

Hannibal cocked an eyebrow at him. “Aren’t I?” He asked, raising the scarlet liquid to his lips. “Have I not helped you, Will? In ways no one else possibly could? Have I not set you free?”

“I didn’t ask for that!”

“I’m afraid I disagree.”

“You’re allowed to disagree.” Will snapped, “But don’t you dare condemn me for my greatest sin when my first was trusting you!”

His tone seemed to give Hannibal pause.

“I’m not angry about what you did, Will.” He said quietly. “I don't resent you for it - I applaud you.”

And the thing was, Will knew he was serious. Because as far as Hannibal was concerned, the more dark and depraved the act, the more he admired it. The worse it was, the better it was. And there was nothing so worse as what Will had done to him all those years ago.

He probably looked back on Will’s betrayal, his deception, with a kind of twisted appreciation now.

“Look, let’s just…talk about something else.” Will said gruffly. And then, because he had no idea what to talk about, what else to say, he shoved a forkful of food into his mouth. “Mmm. This is delicious.”

“Filet mignon with red wine mushrooms and parmesan potatoes.” Hannibal explained. “I’m glad you like it. Although I do wish you would have told me what you would have preferred. I would have been happy to make it for you.”

“I like everything you make.” Will said quickly, and then blushed when he realized what he said, when he saw Hannibal’s lip curl.

“Really?” He purred. “Everything?”

Will huffed. “Yes.” He said shortly. “Everything.”

Hannibal nodded, mouth twisted as though he were trying hard not to laugh. “Good to know.”

“Don’t get any ideas.” Will told him around another bite of steak. “That’s not a free pass for you to go out and start killing people, you know.”

“Yes, dear.” Hannibal drawled, twisting his mouth into a small, sarcastic pout. Will shook his head, smiling despite himself.

“God, Bedelia was right, wasn’t she? I really am your bride…your nagging wife.”

“Yes, I suppose you are.” Hannibal agreed, looking far too pleased with the idea for Will’s liking. “Well, if that’s the case, I believe a wedding present is long overdue.”

“Except we’re not married.” Will reminded him pointedly.

“Not yet.” Hannibal said lightly. “I suppose, until we are, this will have to suffice.”

So saying, Hannibal pulled a package out from under his seat and presented it to Will.

“Happy Valentine’s Day, mylimasis.” He said. “May there be many more to come.”

Will looked at the box and then back to Hannibal, and suddenly felt horribly guilty. It had never even occurred to him that they would be exchanging presents. “Hannibal…I can’t. I didn’t get you anything.”

“You’ve already given me the greatest gift I could ever ask for, Will.” Hannibal said. “Yourself.”

Will rolled his eyes and shook his head with a small, fond smile. “You’re such a sap.”

“So I’ve been told.” Hannibal assured him dryly, bringing the package closer to Will. “Now, if you would please, it’s rude to refuse a gift.”

“What are you gonna do about it if I do?” Will asked mockingly. “Eat me?”

“Don’t tempt me, mylimasis.” Hannibal said with a wicked smile, and when Will still hesitated, he said, “Would it help if I told you I didn’t spend a dime on it?”

Intrigued now, and more than a little wary, Will took the box with a raised eyebrow. Whatever it was, it was heavier than he had been expecting. He pulled off the ribbon, glancing up at Hannibal when it fell to the floor, but the man’s face betrayed absolutely nothing as he lifted the lid. When he looked inside, when he saw what it was, Will’s heart stopped.

It was Chiyoh’s gun - cleaned and oiled, laying on top of a bed of velvet cloth. Will stared down at the gun, and then looked up at Hannibal, unsure what he was doing, what was happening.

Hannibal seemed confused by Will’s reaction, because he frowned. “It’s yours now.” He said. “You’ve earned it - you fought Yuri’s man and you prevailed, despite the odds against you. I thought you could keep it as a memento of your...achievement.”

“Oh.” Was all Will could think of to say. He had been so sure Hannibal hadn’t believed him when he said the gun was Mikhail’s…was this a test of some kind? Was he trying to say something? Will’s thoughts buzzed to their previous discussion about hell and the betrayal of benefactors, and he felt his stomach drop.

Did Hannibal suspect…did he know where Will had gotten the gun?

No. No, he couldn’t have. Will had been careful, he had kept the case hidden and the gun in his truck. And Hannibal never went in his truck. And Chiyoh would have been careful too. She wouldn’t have said a word, would have done everything she could to make sure Hannibal never found out she had given Will a gun. If he did, she was as good as dead. They both were. So, he couldn’t have found out from Chiyoh.

Unless…

Unless she had set him up. Unless she was trying to make it look like Will was going to betray Hannibal again. But why would she do that? It made no sense. It didn’t get her anything, not that he could think of, so why-

When Hannibal gently took his hand, Will jumped, and looked at him with wide and wild eyes. Hannibal’s frown deepened. “I apologize, Will.” He said. “I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“No, no!” Will said quickly, setting the box aside. “No, you didn’t upset me, I just…wasn’t expecting it. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Hannibal said, his thumb beginning to stroke back and forth across Will’s wrist. “I would like you to carry it with you from now on, Will. Not only for your own protection, but also because I quite like the idea of you keeping that… *beast’s* gun. It’s fitting.”

“Okay.” Will agreed weakly, knowing he couldn’t refuse, that it was probably better anyway if he did have it on him most of, if not all of, the time.

After all, he never knew when he might need it again.

Or for who.

Hannibal smiled at him. “Good boy.”

—-------

Later that night, long after they had gone to bed, Will felt Hannibal shift beside him, his warm breath stir his hair as he leaned down to whisper in his ear.

“Good night, Will.” He said, and pressed a kiss, so soft, so barely there, that Will wasn’t entirely sure it had even happened, against his cheek. ”I love you.”

—-------

When Will had met the mechanic at Ronny’s bar to tow his truck, he had been pleasantly surprised to see that the ramshackle building was still standing after the storm.

A few days later, when he pulled up to the bar again for the night, he was somewhat less-than-pleasantly surprised to find Ronny waiting for him by the door, his arm in an immobilizing sling and a heavy scowl on his face.

“Hey!” Will called, climbing out of his truck. “What are you doing here?”

“What d’you mean ‘what am I doing here’?” Ronny barked back. “It’s my bar, boy! I own the place! I got every right to be here!”

“I know.” Will explained patiently as he crossed the parking lot. “I just thought you’d be out for at least another week.”

“Wanted to see if I still had a bar after that storm.” Ronny grunted, itching a spot on his shoulder under the bulky straps of the sling. “Gotta say I’m surprised how good it looks. You been inside yet?”

“No, not yet.” Will told him, slipping past him to unlock the door. “How long have you been waiting out here?”

“Couple minutes.”

“Why didn’t you just go inside?” Will asked, perplexed, staring after Ronny as he stepped inside the bar.

“‘Couldn’t get in. I gave you my only key.” Ronny informed him as he moved slowly along the perimeter of the bar, scanning the walls for signs of mold.

“Do you want me to make you a copy?”

“No, I do not. The fewer keys floatin’ around, the better. Can’t risk someone getting their hands on one and using it to rob me, can I?”

“...Right.” Will said slowly, looking around the shabby bar and thinking that a person would have to be pretty desperate to even consider robbing Ronny’s bar.

And that anyone intending to rob anything probably had no intention of using a key to do so.

While Ronny continued his inspection, Will prepared the bar for opening - spraying the countertop and tables with cleaner, wiping them down, gathering the glasses from the drying rack in the back, washing lemons and limes, slicing them into slivers, shaving their rinds.

“Place looks pretty good, all things considerin’.” Ronny said after a while, looking around the bar with a satisfied nod. “Good job, boy. I can’t believe you haven’t managed to completely fuck it up.”

“Thanks.” Will drawled, wondering if he would regret it later if he “accidently” let it slip to Hannibal how rude his boss was. “Are you gonna hang out here for a little while, or are you heading out?”

“Think I might stay. Been a while since I’ve seen anyone, and I could use a drink.”

“Um, I don’t think that’s a good idea.” Will said. “Aren’t you on pain meds?”

“Pfft.” Ronny scoffed. “I flushed those the second I got home.”

“What? *Why* ?”

“‘Cause that’s exactly the last thing big pharma wants me to do.” Ronny said, tapping the side of his nose. “Think about it - they pump you full of that addictive crap, send you on your way, and boom! they’ve got themselves a customer for life. All about money, kid, that’s all everything’s ever about. Well, I’m telling ya what, ain’t no way in hell are those evil bastards gettin’ their hands on a single cent of mine!”

“...Uh huh.” Will managed. Either Ronny had phenomenal insurance or he didn’t understand how it worked. “Okay, then. Um, can I get you a beer, or...anything?”

“Beer’s good.” Ronny said, sitting himself on the stool in front of Will. “Let’s see what ya got, kid.”

If Will had known that all it took for Ronny to loosen up was a few beers, he would have brought him a twelve pack the day they met. By the time people began trickling into the bar, Ronny was positively cheerful, talking with some of his regulars, laughing and joking with his friends (who all insisted on buying him a drink, and which Will was more than willing to supply). And as he watched him, it slowly dawned on Will that the bar was very important to Ronny, that it was the most important thing he had, maybe the only thing he had, and that he had probably been very lonely those past two weeks he couldn't come in. Seeing him so happy made Will glad he had agreed to help him, glad that he could make things just a little easier for him.

But as much as Will enjoyed helping Ronny, he began to grow more and more anxious as the night wore on and closing time drew near. Ronny didn't seem to be in any hurry to leave, and Will began to wonder just how long Ronny intended to stay, if he would make Will stay later than he normally would, and if so, just when Will would finally be allowed to leave. Because despite the fact that the bar was actually crowded for once (word must have gotten out that Ronny was there) and that Will was surrounded by people, without Hannibal, he felt completely alone. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other and glanced up at the clock on the far wall, his stomach lurching when he saw the time.

"Boy, you've looked at that clock at least fifty times in the last fifteen minutes." Ronny barked suddenly, startling Will from his thoughts. "Somewhere you gotta be?"

"No, sir." Will said, quickly grabbing a glass to distract himself - technically, he was still expected to be there for another hour, so he might as well keep himself busy until then.

"No?" Ronny eched, a bit mockingly, as he surveyed Will over the rim of his glass. "Are you sure? You've been distracted all night, kid. I hope you weren't like this the whole time I was out."

"Ah, leave him alone, Ronny! Will's been great!" Travis called from the other end of the bar. "Hell of a lot nicer than you, anyway!"

"Hell of a lot better looking, too!" Jenny May added, grinning when she saw Will blush.

Ronny snorted. “I don’t know what y’all are talking about - I think I’m an absolute joy to be around.”

“Compared to what?!”

“Will, charge Travis double for that last beer.” Ronny said imperiously, taking another sip of his drink (“Oh, come on!”), before fixing Will with a slightly out-of-focus stare. “Seriously, son. Somethin’ wrong?”

“No, everything’s fine, Ronny. Really.” Will told him, pouring himself a couple fingers of whiskey, hoping it would help him calm down a bit. “I’m just tired. Looking forward to going home.”

“Hmph. Can’t imagine why. From what Nadine tells me, that boyfriend of yours sounds like a real piece of work.” Ronny yawned. “Not sure what you’re so eager to go home to him for.”

For a moment, Will could only stare at him. “You…Nadine told you about him?”

“Yeah.” Ronny said slowly. “Why?”

“That…doesn’t bother you?”

“What?”

“That I’m…” Will hesitated, unsure how to put it. It was complicated, what he was. He wasn’t sure what to call it. In the end, he kept it simple, for Ronny’s sake. “Gay?”

“‘No. Why would it?”

“I don’t know.” Will said with an embarrassed shrug. “I just thought you wouldn’t…like that sort of thing.”

Ronny gave him a look that told Will he thought he was an idiot (though Will had suspected he thought as much for a while). “Look, Will. The way I see it, what goes on between two consenting adults behind closed doors ain’t none of my business.”

“Oh.” Will said, surprised. “Um…okay, then. Good.” And then, because he was a glutton for punishment, apparently, he asked, “What exactly did Nadine tell you about us?”

Ronny shrugged. “Not much. Just that you were with some guy who was mistreatin’ you. She didn’t really go into details about it. But I get the feelin’ from her that he’s the Devil.”

“She’s exaggerating.” Will mumbled. “He’s not that bad.”

Technically, he wasn’t.

He was so much worse.

“Hmm. If you say so, kid. But I’ve known Nadine a long time, and she don’t exaggerate. And she usually ain’t wrong, either.”

“I’ll be sure to tell her you said that the next time I see her.”

“Please don’t. That’s the last thing I need.” He smirked, but when Will didn’t smile back, he grew serious again. “Tell ya what, kid, why don’t you take off early? I’ll close up here.”

“No, it’s okay.” Will told him. “I’ve still got another hour to go and your arm-”

“Don’t worry about it. I can manage.” Ronny said, clambering to his feet and squeezing himself behind the bar. “Go on, get out of here. Go home. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Thanks, Ronny.” Will said, shooting him a small, grateful smile.

“Yeah, well. Don’t get used to it.” Ronny said gruffly. “I still expect you to stay until closing tomorrow night. Got it?”

“Yes, sir.” Will said with a grin as he grabbed his jacket from. “Have a good night, Ronny!”

“Take care, kid.” Ronny called back, raising his one good arm after him.

Hannibal was surprised when Will came home sooner than he had been expecting, but recovered quickly - sweeping Will off his feet and carrying him to bed, ignoring Will’s squawks of protest as he did.

“Put me down! You’re being ridiculous - I can walk just fine on my own! Hannibal!”

Will opened his eyes with a sigh, blinking sleepily in the morning light, and turned his head to find Hannibal’s face just a few inches from his own.

“Good morning.” He said, voice quiet, eyes soft.

“Morning.” Will mumbled back, burying his face shyly in Hannibal’s chest. Hannibal chuckled at him.

“Let me see you, love.” He said, stroking Will’s exposed cheek with a long finger. “I haven’t seen you for so long.”

“Oh no!” Will said around a yawn. “A whole six hours without me!”

“I’m glad you understand so well.” Hannibal purred, beginning to pepper him with kisses and drawing him closer…

...closer….

….closer…

So close, too close, until there was no space left between them at all.

“I love you.” Hannibal breathed above him. “I love you, Will.”

—----------

Will was screaming.

Screaming, sobbing - trapped in the darkness. Thrashing, gasping - struggling to get away.

“Will! Will, what is it?”

Hands grabbing for him from the dark.

“No! No!” Shouting, twisting away, off the bed and falling through the air, landing on the hard, cold floor. Hitting it hard enough to knock the air from his lungs.

“Will!”

Lights on, blinding. Will panting on the hardwood as Hannibal rushed to his side of the bed, reaching for him.

“Will-”

“No, don’t!” Will cried, scrambling, cowering, away from him. “Don’t!”

Hannibal stopped, hands still outstretched, placating, and dropped to his knees beside Will.

“It’s alright, Will.” He murmured. “It was a nightmare. Just a nightmare, that’s all.”

Will sucked air and shook his head. It wasn’t just a nightmare - it was a knife piercing, tearing, ripping through his flesh, everything inside suddenly out, warm blood spilling down his front and onto the floor while Hannibal held him firmly in place, keeping him still as he gazed down at him with cold, dead eyes...

Was a nightmare still a nightmare if it was a memory? Was it any less real if it once was but wasn’t anymore?

Will swallowed, mouth dry, throat sore, and waited for his heart to slow while Hannibal continued to murmur quietly, to him, bits of Lithuanian scattered amongst the English.

"... *Viskas gerai* …you're alright…everything's okay, Will… *nusiramink, mylimasis* …"

Will closed his eyes and forced himself to take several deep, slow breaths.

"I'm sorry." He croaked eventually. "Just...bad dream. Sorry."

"There's no need to apologize." Hannibal told him, slowly reaching out again and touching his shoulder. Will shuddered. Hannibal frowned. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Will shook his head. Swallowed the bile that had invaded his throat at the thought.

"That's alright." Hannibal reassured him. "Come here, mylimasis. Let's get you back to bed-"

"No!" Will edged away from him again. "No!"

"Shh, shh, shh." Hannibal cooed, pulling him into his arms before he could get any further away. "You don't have to sleep yet if you don't want to. Let's just sit here until you feel better."

Will nodded, blinking blearily in Hannibal's arms. His eyes were heavy. It was hard to keep them open. And when Hannibal began to gently rock him, and they dipped alarmingly low, he abruptly pulled away. Hannibal let him.

"I told you I don't want to sleep!" He snapped, stumbling to his feet.

"Where are you going?"

“Nowhere. I…I think I might read for a bit.”

“I’ll read to you-” Hannibal began to offer as he stood, but Will interrupted him before he could finish.

“No.” He said, avoiding Hannibal’s eyes. “No, it’s fine. You don’t have to stay up with me. Go back to bed, I’ll see you in the morning.”

“I won’t be able to sleep if I know you can’t.”

“No-”

“Please let me, Will. For my sake as much as yours.”

Will heaved a sigh and rubbed his aching eyes. “Fine.”

Hannibal smiled and looped an arm around his waist. “Would you like me to make you some tea?” He offered as he helped him back to the bed.

Will shook his head. He didn’t trust Hannibal to make him anything right now.

“Very well. Come here, poor boy, you’re freezing.” Hannibal fussed, tucking the blankets firmly around him. Once he had finished, Hannibal then settled himself beside Will on the bed, and grabbed the copy of *Wuthering Heights* from the nightstand.

“Are you warm enough?” He asked, pulling Will against him.

Will nodded, laying his head against Hannibal's chest and listening to his eerily calm and steady heartbeat.

"Good." Hannibal said, opening the book and beginning to read. "'Nelly, do you never dream queer dreams?' She said, suddenly, after some minutes' reflection. 'Yes, now and then.' I answered. 'And so do I. I've dreamt in my life dreams that have stayed with me ever after…'".

It was hard to stay awake, late as it was, tired as he was, wrapped in Hannibal's warmth and listening to the soothing cadence of his voice and heart. But Will fought, and fought hard, dragging his lids open each time they fell, watching the words blur on the page before him as he forced himself to read along.

"'...we're dismal enough without conjuring up ghosts and visions to perplex us. Come, come, be merry and like yourself…'"

Shifting slightly. Can't sleep, won't sleep. Won't go back to the nightmares waiting for him, the blood and pain that lie on just the other side of consciousness…

"'...If I were in heaven, Nelly, I should be extremely miserable…'"

Tired. So tired. And Hannibal's arm around his shoulders, his thumb stroking his cheek, gliding rhymically back and forth, lulling him to sleep.

"'...heaven did not seem my home; and I broke my heart with weeping to come back to earth…'"

He could close his eyes for just a second. Just a minute. It wasn't that long. Not really.

"'...So he shall never know how I love him...because he's more myself than I am. Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same…'"

In the weeks since he'd found it, the old dock on the edge of their property had become a kind of side project for Will, something to work on when he had nothing else to do. Why he even bothered, he wasn't really sure - he and Hannibal would be leaving in a few weeks. Even if he did manage to completely repair it before then, it wasn't like he would get to enjoy it for very long.

Still. It was something to do, something to pass the time. And as he worked, as he pulled the rotted boards fee and nailed the new ones in place, as he sanded them down and stained them, Will couldn't help but think about the endless summer days of his childhood, trotting after his daddy down impossibly long docks, eager to help him fix the boats and tripping over loose boards and scattered tools, his daddy cursing under his breath at a hard job and as he pulled splinters from Will's chubby fingers with his clumsy, calloused hands.

And one day, while he was working on prying a particularly stubborn board from the dock, Will found his thoughts drifting to the days after Hannibal had left him behind, after he had been released from the hospital - that miserable limbo of a life between Hannibal, a life without him. Those long, empty days he had spent repairing his boat, rebuilding it. Getting it ready to sail across the Atlantic.

Getting ready to go after Hannibal…

Will shook his head. That was a long time ago. Things were different then. He was different then.

The man he had once been had died somewhere along the way to where he was now.

Will suddenly felt the hairs on the back of his neck prickle, as if he was being watched, and he raised his head, expecting to see Hannibal, but found something else instead.

Standing just a few feet away, staring at him, was the little buck Will had seen so many times in the fields around the house.

Will slowly took the nails he had been holding in his mouth and set them down on the dock, not wanting to startle it. With small and careful movements, he climbed down from the dock and straightened to his full height.

The buck watched him, ears pricked, breath hanging white and heavy in the chilly, morning air. Curious, Will took a single step closer.

The buck didn't move.

Will took another step.

An ear flickered.

Another.

The buck continued to stare at him with its black, liquid eyes. Eyes that were far too intelligent, far too cruel, for a deer.

He was only a few feet away now. He was close enough to touch it. If he just reached out his hand, he could…

And as soon as the thought occurred to him, the buck's white tail suddenly twitched, and with a snort, it turned on graceful, delicate legs and disappeared into the brush.

“AHHHH!”

Will was screaming.

Under Hannibal, trapped beneath him, his hands pinning him down. He thrashed, his muscles seizing, his fingers scrambling for purchase as his back arched up off the bed.

The scream died down. Just long enough to catch his breath before he started wailing again.

“Ah! AHHHH!”

It was pleasure unlike anything Will had ever felt before, the sweetest agony he had ever known - blinding, raw, his every nerve on fire. Will was screaming louder than he had ever screamed in his entire life…

He never wanted it to stop...

It had to stop - if it didn’t, it would kill him.

Hannibal above him, panting, growling, leaning down to capture Will’s lips with his, swallowing his scream -

“AHHHHHHHH!”

It was only after it was over, after Hannibal had pulled away and Will had collapsed, spent and shaking on the bed, that it occurred to him that there had once been a life before Hannibal, a life before he knew him.

A life without him.

‘How did I do it?’ He wondered as Hannibal dragged him into his arms, holding him close, nuzzling his hair, kissing his cheeks. ‘How did I ever live without you?’

Will sighed, burying his face in the crook of Hannibal’s neck.

“I love you, Will.” Hannibal murmured. “More than you know.”

‘I do know.’ Will thought, closing his eyes. ‘I love you too. More than words can say.’

And it was only after Hannibal had fallen asleep and Will was left alone in the darkness that it occurred to him that if there had been a life before Hannibal, then there might be a life after him, a life without him.

That there may come a day when they would have to say goodbye.

Will opened his eyes. Looked up at Hannibal’s shadowy form. Watched the gentle rise and fall of his chest, listened to the ebb and flow of his breathing.

‘Please don’t hurt me like you did before.’ He prayed. ‘Please don’t make me give you up. I will if I have to, but I don’t want to. Please don’t leave me. I need you. I can’t live without you. Please, please, *please* , don’t make me lose you again...’

_____

“I think I’m ruining it.” Will said, staring anxiously down at the sluggishly bubbling sauce on the burner.

“It’s been cooking for three minutes, Will. I’m sure you haven’t ruined it.”

“Can you just come over here and check?” Will insisted. “It doesn’t look right.”

Hannibal abandoned the dough he had been kneading with a sigh and came to stand beside Will at the stove. He studied the slowly disintegrating tomatoes for a moment, and then took the wooden spoon from Will and stirred them.

“You didn’t ruin it. It looks fine.”

“‘Fine’?” Will echoed. “What do you mean? What’s wrong with it?”

“Nothing, mylimasis.” Hannibal assured him patiently, kissing his cheek before he moved away again. Will huffed unhappily after him.

“What about the beef?” He asked. “Do I need to add anything to it?”

“You can season it with salt, pepper, and oregano.”

“How much?”

“Just use your best judgment, Will.”

“I’m with *you* !” Will pointed out. “I don’t have any ‘best judgment’! I don’t even have any ‘good judgment’!”

Hannibal chuckled, and Will snarled.

“If it tastes like shit, it’s your fault, not mine!”

“I fully accept all responsibility if it does.” Hannibal agreed, feeding the dough through the pasta maker. “But I think you’re worrying for nothing - I have complete faith in you, Will.”

“You say that now.” Will muttered, poking a particularly large tomato with the spoon and flinching with it burst. “You’ve never had my cooking before.”

“That which doesn’t kill us makes us stronger.”

“You’re a jerk.”

“You knew that when you chose me, darling.” Hannibal said cheerfully as he laid the fresh sheets of pasta aside for later.

“Yeah, and that tells you pretty much everything you need to know about my sense of good judgment.”

Hannibal didn’t answer him, but Will could sense the weight of his gaze on him, could feel his eyes boring into the back of his neck.

A moment of silence passed.

And in the next, there was music - classical, soft and slow. Will looked over his shoulder and found Hannibal adjusting the volume of his phone.

“Will.”

“What?”

“Dance with me.”

“No.” Will snapped, turning away.

“Why not?” Hannibal asked, footsteps growing louder as he came closer.

“I can’t dance.”

“You can’t cook either.” Hannibal pointed out, resting his chin on Will’s shoulder and wrapping his arms around his waist. “But that’s not stopping you.”

“Only because you’re making me! I’ve been begging you to take over since we’ve started and you’ve done nothing but ignore me!”

“Have you?” Hannibal asked, nuzzling Will’s cheek. “I hadn’t noticed. To be honest, mylimasis, you complain so much that I think I’ve learned to tune it out.”

Will wanted to be mad. Instead, he snorted, and when he did, Hannibal turned him slowly around so that they were face-to-face. When he saw Will’s expression, he smiled.

“Have I told you lately that I love you?” He asked, pressing his forehead to Will’s.

“You tell me that at least fifteen times a day.” Will informed him, rolling his eyes as he looped his arms around Hannibal’s neck.

“Really? So few times as that? Then, my dear, I shall endeavor to tell you more often in the future.”

Will laughed, and Hannibal began to gently sway them back and forth.

Hannibal was kissing him, the hollows of his throat, trailing his tongue teasing down the tendons in his neck…

Down, down, down….

He kissed Will’s chest, directly over his heart, nipped lightly at Will’s puckered nipple, grinning wolfishly when Will whimpered, and dragged the edge of his teeth along the contours of his abdomen, pausing here and there to leave a kiss behind before he continued further down...

Down...down...down...

Will was panting when he reached the junction of his groin and thigh, clenching the sheets as Hannibal licked and sucked, kissed and mouthed.

And when he took him, Will closed his eyes. Gasped for breath. Moaned for more. Begged for more.

Hannibal hummed around him and obliged.

Euphoria. Ecstasy. Bliss. Nerve endings firing, spine tingling, dopamine rushing. Pressure mounting, pleasure building. Peaking, crowning, climaxing, closer, closer, almost there…

Something's wrong.

Will wasn't sure what it was, how he knew, but it hit him hard and fast, completely out of nowhere - one moment he was on cloud nine, and the next, he was crashing back down to earth, his skin prickling uneasily, uncomfortably with the feeling they were not alone, that they were being watched...

He slowly opened his eyes.

Reluctantly turned his head...

Beverly.

Will's heart faltered, his breath caught.

Beverly staring at them. Unblinking, unmoving, unimpressed.

Watching him.

Judging him.

From Heaven to Hell, rapture to misery. Shame. Burning shame. Overwhelming guilt. Pinned, trapped, beneath the weight Beverly's stern, disappointed gaze, unable to escape, wanting nothing more than to run, hide - anything but face what he had done, what he was doing, everything and everyone he had betrayed when he had chosen Hannibal.

Fingers twitching, uncurling from the sheets, hands shaking as they reached for Hannibal, pushing him away, eyes never leaving Beverly's.

"S-stop!" Will croaked, voice wrecked. "Hannibal, stop!"

Everything crashing to a halt, Hannibal abruptly pulling back. Will scrambling away, wanting to put as much distance between himself and Hannibal as possible.

"Will? Will, what is it? Did I hurt you?"

"It's nothing!" Will cried. Avoiding his gaze. Grabbing a blanket, desperate to cover himself, to put something, anything, between himself and what was happening.

Hannibal confused. "Will, I don't understand. What happened?"

"Nothing!" Shrill, hysterical. "Nothing! Everything's fine!"

"It's not fine. You're obviously upset." Hannibal insisted, reaching for him. "Darling, please talk to me."

Throat tight. Sobbing now, trying to hold it in. Arms wrapped protectively around himself, hunching, cowering away as Hannibal drew him close. "I can't! I can't!"

"You can. Shhh, shhh, it's alright. Deep breaths for me...that's it."

Terror fading, sputtering, gone.

Nothing left.

Numb.

Will blinked, raised his head from where it had been resting on Hannibal's chest, and looked around the room.

Empty. No one else but them.

Will sighed, relieved, miserable, and dropped his head back down to rest on Hannibal's tense shoulder. Aware that Hannibal was worried. Too tired to care, too terrified to tell him what had happened.

"I'm okay." He said eventually, calmer now. "I just...I just got a little overwhelmed, that's all."

Hannibal didn't answer. Will knew he didn't believe him.

"Please don't lie to me, Will." Quiet. Pained. "Just tell me what's wrong. Let me help you."

Will bit his lip. Shut his eyes.

"You can't help me." He whispered back. "No one can."

—-------

The bell chimed cheerfully overhead as Will stepped inside the gas station. Nadine looked up from behind the counter, and when she saw him, her face split into a wide smile.

“Hi, honey! How are ya?”

“Good!” Will said, beaming back. “What about you? You been doing okay?”

“Better than okay, honey, ‘specially now that I’ve seen you. What can I do for ya?”

“Just need to get some gas.” Will told her, laying a few bills on the counter between them.

“Sure thing, hon. You headin’ over to Ronny’s for the night?”

“Yeah.” Will said with a nod.

“How’s it been workin’ for him? He treatin’ you okay? ‘Cause if he’s not, I’ll be havin’ words with him. I don’t care how bad his shoulder’s hurtin.”

“No, no.” Will assured her quickly. “Ronny’s been great.”

Nadine stopped what she was doing, her fingers hovering over the keys of her cash register.

“‘Great’?” She repeated, raising a single eyebrow at him. “I’ve heard a lot of different people describe Ronny a lot of different ways, but ‘great’ was never one of them.”

Will laughed, and Nadine blinked. She seemed surprised by his reaction.

“He’s not so bad when you get to know him.” Will said with a chuckle. “Trust me, my last boss was a lot worse than he is.”

“Mmm.” Nadine hummed, and though the edges of her lips were still curled in a faint smile, it seemed a little too forced, a little less sure, than when he had first walked in. “Alright, honey. Out with it - wha’s going?”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t give me that - just look at’chu! I ain’t never seen you smile so big as you are now! So what is it, baby? What are you so happy about?”

“No, really, it’s nothing.” Will told her, ducking his head bashfully to hide his grin. “I’m just in a good mood.”

“Don’t give me that - somethin’s happened. What is it, honey? You finally leave that boyfriend of yours? Is that it?”

“No.” Will said, blushing furiously. “No, things have gotten better between us. A lot better, actually.”

Nadine’s smile faded slightly. “What do you mean? Better how?”

“I don’t know.” Will said with a shrug, avoiding her narrowed eyes. “Just better.”

Nadine was silent for a moment, studying him.

“Has he hit you since the last time I saw you?” She asked eventually.

“What?” Will sputtered. “No!”

“No? Then what’s that?”

She nodded at the small, round bruises encircling his wrists - echoes of Hannibal’s fingers, where he had gripped Will a bit too tightly, a bit too enthusiastically, a few nights ago in bed.

“That was an accident!” Will quickly explained, embarrassed, tugging his sleeve down to cover them. “He didn’t mean it! We were...you know...he just got a little carried away.”

“Uh huh. I bet he gets carried away a lot, doesn’t he?”

“Well-”

“He ever make you do something you weren’t comfortable with? He ever force himself on you?”

“No, never!”

“When’s the last time he hit you?”

“Not for a while.” Will told her, flinching at the memory of Hannibal’s hands around his throat in Atlanta.

“A few weeks ain’t ‘a while’, Will.” Nadine said, frowning at him. “And ‘just once’ is one time too many.”

“Look, things are different now.” Will said defensively. “He’s different. He’s changed.”

Nadine inhaled long and slow, her hand resting on her hip as she looked at him with pity.

It hurt.

“People don’t change, honey.” She said.

“They can. If they want to.”

“‘Cept no one ever really wants to, do they? Look, hon, I don’t know what he’s doin’ or what he’s sayin’ or how he’s treatin’ you right now, but it’s a lie. You hear me? Who he was before, who he is when he’s hurtin’ you? That’s who he really is.”

“It’s not!” Will insisted, a little desperately now. “Everything’s fine now!”

Nadine was quiet for a moment. “I hope you’re right, honey. I really do. But if you’re not...if he starts hittin’ you again, if things get bad again, I want you to call me, okay? Don’t matter where you, day or night, rain or shine, you call me and I’ll come get’cha. You have my number?”

Will nodded at the floor, too ashamed to look at her.

“Good.” She said. Will hated that she sounded so sad. That he had been the one to make her sad. “You take care of yourself now, baby.”

“I always do.” Will lied.

Another nightmare, another miserable awakening. At least this time it was closer to dawn instead of in the middle of the night, faint streaks of golden orange across the horizon.

“...I was weeping as much for him as her: we do sometimes pity creatures that have none of the feeling either for themselves or others.” Hannibal read quietly. He sounded tired. “When I first looked into his face, I perceived that he had got intelligence of the catastrophe-”

Will yawned, an uncomfortable stretch that pulled the damaged tissue of his jaw, and settled back against Hannibal. Hannibal paused, just long enough to tilt his head and press a quick kiss to Will’s temple before he continued.

“‘And - did she ever mention me?’ he asked, hesitating, as if he dreaded the answer to his question would introduce details that he could not bear to hear.”

He had been holding Will since he woke, screaming and shaking, over an hour before, speaking softly, reassuringly, to him until he finally calmed down. And when Will refused to go to bed, he didn’t complain - he simply rearranged him so that he was comfortably draped against Hannibal’s warm and solid frame. He had been reading to him ever since, despite the fact that there were faint circles under his eyes and his voice was growing hoarse.

“‘Her senses never returned: she recognized nobody from the time you left her.’”

Will turned his eyes away from the pages of *Wuthering Heights* and looked up at Hannibal, studying him, memorizing the details of his face.

‘I could be happy.’ He thought. ‘With just this. I don’t need anything else - I just need you.’

Hesitantly, shyly, Will kissed Hannibal’s throat and felt his pulse against his lips. Hannibal’s lip curled into a slight smile at his touch.

“...‘you said I killed you - haunt me, then! The murdered do haunt their murderers, I believe, I know that ghosts have wandered on earth. Be with me always - take any form - drive me mad! only do not leave me in this abyss, where I cannot find you! Oh, God! it is unutterable! I cannot live without my life! I cannot live without my soul!’”

Chapter End Notes

Believe it or not, the next chapter marks the beginning of the end!

Oh, You Never Told Me True Love was Gonna Hurt

Chapter Summary

Will makes a shocking discovery

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

March dawned in a sudden burst of color and with an unusual warmth that promised the dark, cold days of winter would soon be a distant memory. Though Will barely noticed the difference, couldn't bring himself to care, the fast approaching spring made Hannibal positively giddy.

Or at least, as close to giddy as Hannibal Lecter could be.

"What are you so happy about?" Will mumbled drowsily one evening. He was lying in Hannibal's arms, the two of them reclined on a chaise lounge chair on the deck and sharing a cup of tea, while Hannibal hummed quietly above him.

"What's there not to be happy about?" Hannibal asked him with a small smile. "When I have you?"

"You had me a week ago and you weren't like this." Will insisted.

"Yes, but I did not have such nice weather a week ago."

A sudden gust of wind had Will burrowing closer, deeper, into Hannibal. "It's not that nice." He complained. "And since when do you care about the weather?"

“I’m simply looking forward to the spring, mylimasis.” Hannibal told him, stroking his hair. “I appreciate it for what it’s worth.”

“What do you mean?”

Hannibal shrugged. “Spring has long been associated with rebirth.” He said. “New beginnings and transformation. It’s about starting over, Will.”

Will blinked heavily. He hadn’t slept much the night before. He didn’t have the patience for Hannibal’s metaphors. “Is that what you’re hoping for for us?”

“Aren’t you?”

“Yes.” Will admitted slowly. “But I don’t think we need a specific season to start over - we can do it any time.”

“We don’t.” Hannibal agreed. “I just enjoy the symbolism, Will. And besides. It's human nature to give meaning to our world. To contain the unknown. To try and understand the things that are beyond our understanding. Don’t you think it’s an incredible coincidence that we’ve been given the chance to begin again at this particular time of year?”

Will huffed. “I think sometimes life is far more mundane than we give it credit for.” He said. “It’s just a coincidence, Hannibal. That’s all. Nothing more.”

“You think love is mundane?”

Why did Will feel like he was walking into a trap?

“I think aligning the success of love with the earth’s orbit is setting yourself up for disappointment.” Will said carefully. “Sometimes things are what they are, Hannibal. There’s no secret, higher meaning behind them.”

“Hmm.” Was Hannibal’s only response, and whether it was because he disagreed with Will or merely pondering his words was unclear. He shifted slightly on the chair, tightening his grip on Will. “It will be your birthday soon.” He said after a moment, clearly eager to change the subject.

“Don’t remind me.” Will was more than happy to indulge him - he didn’t like to contemplate their relationship too closely, to think about their future together and what would happen to them.

Hannibal chuckled. “Oh, come now, mylimasis.” He teased. “You’re still young.”

“Younger than you, at any rate. Why do you keep bringing it up? It’s just another day like any other. There’s nothing special about it.”

“On the contrary.” Hannibal purred. “It’s the most extraordinary day there is - the anniversary of the day you came into this world. I have every reason to celebrate that, Will.”

Will wasn’t sure he agreed. In fact, he was fairly certain that the world would be a far better place if he was never in it.

He hummed, and Hannibal nudged him gently. “Have you decided what you want yet?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

Will sighed. “Because what I want, you can’t get me.” He said eventually.

“Oh?” Hannibal asked, nuzzling Will behind his ear. “You sound very certain of that, Will.”

“I am certain.”

“Well, I do love a challenge. Tell me, darling: what is it you want?”

Will bit his lip. What he wanted more than anything was to not have an empathy disorder and to live a normal life with a normal partner. But obviously, that was never going to happen.

But he could settle for the next best thing.

“I want you,” He said slowly. “To give it up.”

Hannibal tensed slightly behind him. “Give what up?”

“The Ripper. I want you to stop killing, Hannibal. I want you to promise me you’ll never do it again.”

Hannibal didn’t answer him right away. Will wondered if he had crossed a line of some kind.

“You want me to change who I am.” Hannibal said after a moment, and Will huffed impatiently at him.

“Who you are and what you do are two completely different things.”

“Not completely.” Hannibal argued. “It’s what we do that defines who we are.”

“...But it doesn’t have to be.” Will whispered. He hated how pitiful he sounded. He squirmed, embarrassed, and moved so that he wasn’t lying so heavily against Hannibal. “See, I told you that you couldn’t get it for me. Just...forget I said anything. Just get me a book or a new shirt or whatever most people get on their birthdays, okay?”

“...Very well, Will.” Hannibal agreed. But he didn’t sound very happy about it.

The two of them were quiet for a long time after that, listening to the water lapping gently at the shore and the symphony of birds and cicadas singing in the trees. It was incredibly peaceful. Soothing. Will was right on the verge of falling asleep when a strange, low rumbling suddenly echoed through the air.

Hannibal sat up, dragging Will with him, his head swiveling toward the noise while Will grumbled irritably from his arms.

“What?” He whined.

“What is that?” Hannibal asked, squinting in the fading light. “Is that the roaring deer you were telling me about?”

“No, that’s an alligator.”

“ *That’s* an alligator?” Hannibal asked, sounding perplexed. He tilted his head, as though he were trying to hear it better. “What’s it doing?”

“Bellowing.” Will explained around a yawn.

“Why?”

Will shrugged. “Probably warning another alligator to stay away.” He said, unconcerned. “It could be trying to attract a mate but they usually don’t do that until April.”

“Well, it has been usually warm this year.” Hannibal pointed out before growing silent again, listening to the strange, vibrating call. “Alligators are very territorial, aren’t they?” He asked after a moment.

“Oh, just a bit.” Will said sarcastically.

“And they attack people.”

“That’s kind of what they’re known for, yes.”

“Hmm.” Hannibal hummed. “I think, my dear, it would be best if you didn’t go for your walks around the marsh anymore.”

“Oh, do you?” Will drawled with more than just a hint of irritation.

“Yes. I do.” Hannibal said sternly, frowning down at him. “And you should probably stop fishing as well.”

“You’re overreacting-”

“Please, Will.” Hannibal sighed. “For me.”

Will rolled his eyes.

“Fine.”

It happened as they were sitting down for dinner.

It came out of nowhere, without warning, as Hannibal was passing Will a glass of wine. In the millisecond between when his fingers brushed the smooth surface of the glass and Hannibal let it go, an ear-piercing scream erupted from somewhere upstairs.

Will jumped, and the glass slipped from his hand, shattering on the floor in an explosion of diamond-like crystal shards and blood red wine.

Hannibal stared down at the mess at his feet for a few moments before he slowly raised his eyes to look at Will.

“Will?” He asked softly. He sounded uncertain. Nervous almost. “Are you all right?”

Will didn’t answer him. He remained frozen where he was, eyes wide and his hand still outstretched in midair as the screaming continued.

“Will? Will, look at me...look at me, darling, what is it?”

Will was only vaguely aware that Hannibal was talking to him, that his fingers were over his pulse, his hands cupped over his cheeks, trying to get him to turn his head.

“Will… *Will* …”

He was far more focused on the screaming. It still hadn't stopped. He released a shaky breath and Hannibal palmed his forehead.

"No fever." Will heard him mutter, as though he were trying to reassure himself. "Will? Will, can you hear me? Will. Will, talk to me. Please, mylimasis, tell me what's wrong-"

Will closed his eyes briefly, trying to gather his wits. He heaved a shuddering sigh and forced himself to ignore the screams as he finally opened his eyes.

"I'm okay." He whispered. A particularly loud shriek followed his words and he couldn't help but wince. "Really. I'm fine. S-sorry."

But Hannibal clearly didn't believe him. Wasn't going to let him off so easily. "Will, what happened?" He demanded, his hands drifting down to Will's face again, holding him in place. Will licked his lips.

"Nothing." He said. "I just...it slipped."

Hannibal's eyes narrowed. "Don't lie to me, Will." He said. "Now tell me what's wrong."

"Nothing!" Will said again, closing his eyes, trying his best to ignore the wailing that continued to sound relentlessly through the house. "Nothing! It was an accident! Let me go!"

"Open your eyes." Hannibal said in turn, holding him firm when Will tried to pull away. "Let me check your pupils."

Reluctantly, Will dragged his eyes open again and met Hannibal's worried gaze. He was frowning as he peered at Will closely.

"I think you had a seizure."

“No, I didn’t.”

Hannibal ignored him.

“Tell me your name.” He commanded.

“Will Graham.”

“Good. Where are we?”

“Kitchen.” Will mumbled. “New Orleans.”

Hannibal massaged the hinge of his jaw. “That’s right. Does anything hurt?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?” Hannibal pushed, grip tightening.

“Yes, I’m sure.” Will assured him.

Hannibal studied him for a moment longer and then slowly released him. “Will.” He said. “Is there anything you want to tell me? Anything you think I should know?”

Will bit his lip. Forced himself not to look away despite how much he wanted to. Because if he did, then Hannibal would know that he was lying.

“No.” He said quietly. “Everything’s fine.”

—-------

The screaming continued all throughout dinner.

Will was quiet, barely able to hear what Hannibal was saying, barely able to hear himself think, over the noise. And though Hannibal frowned at his pained expression, his monosyllabic answers, the untouched food on his plate, he didn’t press Will for an explanation. Instead, he waited until after they had finished eating.

“Come here.” He said, dragging Will away from the sink.

“I need to wash-”

“Later.” Hannibal insisted, leading him into the master bath and carefully undressing him there. “Indulge me, Will.”

Will sighed but allowed Hannibal to strip him down. He didn’t say a word when he pulled him into the bath with him and he remained silent as Hannibal began to lather his shoulders with his offensively expansive soap.

She was still screaming.

“What are you thinking about, mylimasis?” Hannibal asked him quietly after a while.

“Nothing.” Will managed to answer over the pounding ache in his skull. God, he wished she would stop.

“I doubt that. You’ve been distracted all evening.”

“Sorry.” Will murmured, closing his eyes as Hannibal’s hands began to rub a bit harder, massaging his tightly coiled muscles, trying to get him to relax.

“There’s no need to apologize.” Hannibal said, pressing the side of his face against Will’s. “I just wish you would tell me what’s wrong.”

“Nothing’s wrong!” Will snapped, jerking away from him. “Stop asking!”

“All right, all right.” Hannibal soothed him, gently tugging him back against his chest. “Shh.”

Will didn’t fight as Hannibal settled him in place again. Neither of them spoke. The water sloshed gently between them, warm and fragrant.

It was almost perfect.

It would have been perfect.

If not for the hair-raising wailing that only Will could hear.

—-------

Will stared up at the blackness overhead, his eyes aching, begging to fall shut, his brain throbbing, desperate for relief, while Hannibal slept, still and silent and oblivious, beside him.

The screaming still hadn't stopped. It had been ongoing, without so much as a pause, since dinner. And it was now…

Will glanced over at the alarm clock on the bedside table, the neon LED numbers swimming in front of him.

Three in the morning. Three in the goddamn morning.

And with no end in sight.

Will closed his eyes, swallowed down the sob that was threatening to bubble up and seize his throat.

"Please stop." He whispered, begging. "God, please just stop."

But of course she didn't. Because she had never cared how miserable she had made him before. So why should she start now?

On and on she sang…

On and on she screamed...

Time dragged. Will's thoughts flitted from one subject to another, never lingering for long, and impossible to grasp. He tossed from one side to the other, no longer caring if he woke Hannibal or not. At least if he was awake he would have someone to talk to, someone to distract him from his misery.

But Hannibal remained asleep. And Will remained alone.

With nothing but that eerie, ghostly shrieking to keep him company.

Will's breath hitched. He held his ears, trying to block out the sound.

It didn't help - it continued just as loudly as it did before.

Will didn't understand what was happening, why she was doing it. She had never done this before. What had changed? What did it mean?

How much longer was it going to last?

And then, just as suddenly as it had started, it stopped.

Will blinked, held his breath, hardly daring to believe it. A few beats of silence passed, and Will felt his eyelids begin to dip, felt exhaustion overtake him...

He was just on the verge of sleep, just about to tip over the edge of consciousness, when the screaming started again.

"FUCK!"

Will sat bolt upright, scrambling up from the bed, fumbling in the dark.

"I can't do it! I can't fucking do it anymore!"

"Will?" Came Hannibal's voice before the light switched on. "What's wrong?"

“I can’t! I can’t do it!” Will shouted, clawing at his ears, his face. “Make it stop! For God’s sake, make it stop!”

“What are you doing?” Hannibal asked, surging to his feet. “Will, stop!”

“I can’t do this! I need to get away from here!”

“Go where? Will, slow down-”

“Get off of me!” Will screamed, thrashing when Hannibal grabbed him. “Let go! Let me go!”

“Not until you tell me what’s wrong!” Hannibal said, refusing to release him. “Talk to me. Please.”

Will sagged in his arms, sobbing, barely able to hear anything else over the screams, but Hannibal held him up. “I can’t, I can’t, I can’t!” He chanted. “I can’t do this! I can’t do this anymore!”

“Can’t do what?” Hannibal asked him sharply. “Can’t do what, Will?”

“I just wanna sleep!” Will wailed. “Please, please, I just wanna sleep! I can’t keep listening to her - it’s torture!”

Hannibal was quiet for a moment. “I can help you sleep, Will.” He said eventually. “Just let me get my bag-”

“No!” Will screamed, twisting wildly, frantically, uselessly in his arms. Because what if that wasn’t enough to make it stop? What if the drugs just trapped him in sleep, paralyzed him,

while the screaming continued on and on and Will was unable to wake up, unable to escape? "Let me go! LET ME GO!"

"Will, it's okay! Will!"

Will sobbed. "Please!" He begged. "Please, don't do this to me! Let me go. Please, please, Hannibal, just let me go!"

"Shh." Hannibal hushed him, pulling them down onto the bed. "Shh. Breathe with me. Come on, Will."

Hannibal held him until Will finally calmed down, and even then, he let him go reluctantly. "There." He murmured, thumbing Will's wet cheeks. "Now, can you tell me what's wrong?"

"I need to get away from here."

"Yes, you've made that much clear." Hannibal said dryly. "Can you tell me why?"

Will shook his head, refusing to meet his eyes. Hannibal sighed.

"Alright. Where do you want to go?"

"Anywhere." Will said. "I don't care. It doesn't matter. Just get me away from here."

"Okay." Hannibal said, grabbing Will's jacket and draping it over his shoulders. "Let's go."

Will was so tired that he didn't even realize that Hannibal hadn't insisted on packing a bag. That he only grabbed the keys and his wallet as he led Will out to the car. The only thing he

did notice was that the moment Hannibal closed the door behind him, the screaming finally, *finally* , stopped.

Will sighed with relief. Reveled in the silence that surrounded him.

His eyes fluttered heavily as Hannibal backed out of the driveway.

He was asleep before they made it to the crossroads.

Remained unaware when Hannibal turned around.

He didn't even stir when Hannibal lifted him from the car and carried him back inside the house.

—-------

Will woke to bright sunshine in Hannibal's bed. He blinked. What had happened? How did he get there? The last thing he remembered was climbing into the car…

Will sighed. Hannibal must have brought him back. He rolled over to check the time and winced when he saw it - he had to be at the bar in an hour.

He dragged himself out of bed with a groan and pulled on his clothes. He glanced over at Hannibal's empty side of the bed, wondering where he was. If he had to guess, he was probably in the kitchen, getting breakfast ready. But Will couldn't hear him. Normally, he woke to the sound of the coffee maker groaning, or the clanging of pots and pans, the sizzle of frying eggs and bacon.

But today he heard nothing. After everything that had happened last night, the silence that filled the house seemed unnaturally loud. Will crept from the room into the kitchen, wondering if something was wrong, and came to an abrupt halt when he saw Hannibal at the kitchen table, staring down into a cup of coffee with his head in his hands.

"Um." He said, and Hannibal quickly looked up at him. Will stared at his mussed hair, the bags under his eyes. "Morning."

"Good morning." Hannibal said. The smile he gave Will was tight. It didn't quite meet his dull and puffy eyes. He patted the table in front of him. "Come here, mylimasis. We need to talk."

"I don't have time, Hannibal." Will said quickly, wanting to avoid this conversation at any cost. "I need to get to work."

"I don't think you should go in to work today, Will." Hannibal told him. "You barely got any sleep last night-"

"I slept just fine, Hannibal!" Will snapped.

"Will. Please." Hannibal said, gesturing to the seat beside him. "It won't take long."

Will glared at him. "Are you going to stop me from going?"

Hannibal considered him for a moment. "No. If you really think that's what's best, I won't stop you."

"Good, 'cause I do think that's what's best." Will said, pulling the chair out and dropping reluctantly into it. "What is it?"

Hannibal didn't answer him right away. He seemed to be weighing his words carefully.

“Will, I’m worried about you.” He said at last. “You can’t keep going on like this. It’s not working. It’s not.” He insisted when Will opened his mouth to protest. “You know it’s not. You know what happened last night is going to happen again and that it may only get worse from here. We need to try and figure out what’s wrong. You need to trust me so I can help you-”

“You've already tried to help me, remember? It didn’t work.” Will interrupted him, his hands trembling slightly. “Just face it, Hannibal. I’m crazy and there’s nothing either of us can do about it.”

“...Are you familiar with the ‘Rules of Three’ when it comes to schizophrenics, Will?”

“No.”

“One third of schizophrenics will have a single psychotic episode in their entire lifetime and make a complete recovery.” Hannibal explained. “And one third can be controlled with the correct medication. I think we just need to find the right-”

“And the last third?” Will interrupted him. “What about them?”

Hannibal hesitated. “And one third do not respond to any treatment at all.”

Will swallowed hard.

“Well.” He managed. “I guess we know which one I am.”

“Will, we’ve tried one medication.” Hannibal reminded him. “You might just need a different kind.”

“No.”

“Will-”

“I said ‘no’, Hannibal!”

Hannibal was quiet for a while, studying him. “You still don’t trust me.”

“Of course I don’t.”

“...Have I not been honest with you since we arrived, Will?” Hannibal asked him quietly. “Have I not given you every reason to trust me?”

Will didn’t answer him.

Yes, as far as he knew, Hannibal had done nothing to break his trust. He had done nothing to hurt him. There was nothing suspicious, nothing specific, Will could point to or blame.

But there was still some part of Will that knew Hannibal wasn’t being completely honest with him. That he wasn’t telling Will everything.

That there was *something* going on.

“You have.” He agreed eventually.

“Then why don’t you trust me?”

“After everything else that you’ve done?!” Will shouted, pouncing the table with his fist. “After the encephalitis? Setting me up? Abigail? Italy? Dolarhyde? How could I ever completely trust you again?!”

Hannibal was quiet for a long time after that.

“...I don’t deny what I did.” He finally said. “But I’m asking you to leave it in the past, where it belongs.”

Will scoffed. “You really expect me to do that?”

“I don’t expect you to do anything, Will. I'm just asking you to consider it.” Hannibal tentatively took Will’s curled fist in his hand. “Please, Will.” He said. “Call Ronny and tell him you can’t come in. Stay with me. Let’s try another dose, or a different medication from last time. We can figure this out.”

But Will pulled away. “I need to get going.” He said, staring down at his feet. “The bar opens in two hours and I have to get it ready.”

Hannibal sighed. “Very well, mylimasis.” He said, rising to his feet. He bent forward and kissed the crown of Will’s head. “I love you.”

———————

Will saw the water before he saw the bar - an entire stream of it, bounding happily along down the side of the road. Will stared at it, remembering the night of the flash floods and wondering where the water was coming from, what had happened.

He got his answer a few minutes later, about half a mile before he reached Ronny’s bar. Will slowed to a stop in front of a striped roadblock, watching as a team of men in neon jackets

and hard hats swarmed a geyser of water that had erupted just beyond it. Will sighed and pulled out his phone.

‘Hey. Road’s blocked.’ He texted Ronny. ‘Looks like a pipe burst. Might be late.’

It took only a few seconds for Ronny to respond.

‘Yeah, I know. Water main break. Crew’s working on it now, but it’ll probably take them a while to fix it. You might as well go home, kid.’

‘Do you want me to come back later? After it’s fixed?’

‘No. Take the night off. See you tomorrow.’

‘Okay. Thanks.’ And then, because Will had become suspicious of people and paranoid of things in general since he had met Hannibal, he asked, ‘Do you know why it broke?’

‘Weather we’ve been having. Going from freezing cold to freakishly warm as fast as it did caused pressure changes in the ground.’

‘Makes sense.’

‘Course it does. Why the hell wouldn’t it make sense?’

‘Never mind.’ Will wrote back, rolling his eyes. ‘See you tomorrow.’

‘Yep.’

Will threw the car in reverse and slowly backed up, spinning the wheel as hard as he could before switching back to drive. As he was maneuvering the truck around, his phone buzzed again. Will glanced down at the screen, expecting to find another text from Ronny, and was surprised to see it was from Hannibal.

'I'm going into town for a little bit.' The message read. 'I'll be back at the house tonight before you get off work. But if you need anything, please let me know, and I'll come get you.'

Will read it again and felt his throat tighten at those words. He stared at them for several seconds, thoughts whirling.

Hannibal had been nothing but patient with him ever since they'd arrived in New Orleans, though he had every reason not to be, considering everything Will had put him through, the way he acted. He had suggested and requested, offered advice and opinions, but had never forced Will to do anything he didn't want to do, had never demanded anything from him. Instead, he had emphasized over and over again that Will had a choice in everything, and he had always respected Will's decisions, even when he obviously didn't agree with them. And in return, Will had been nothing but wary and vicious, questioning and fighting him at each and every turn over every little thing. It would have driven any normal person away, but Hannibal had never once wavered in his devotion to Will. Seeing it again now, especially after the way Will had treated him that morning, made him feel unbearably guilty.

Will chewed his lip, trying to decide what to say back.

'Thanks.' He typed, deciding that an apology would be better said in person than sent through a text. 'See you tonight.'

'Until then, mylimasis.'

Will tossed his phone to the empty passenger seat and headed home, determined to make things right between them.

Will opened the front door slowly, cautiously, not quite sure what exactly he was expecting but expecting something - a sudden scream, an ice-cold hand at his throat, a blur of tousled dark curls and flowing white to come flying at him from out of nowhere…

But no. To his relief, nothing happened. Nothing at all. The house remained unremarkable. Just a house. A silent house.

But not an empty one. As he moved down the hall toward the bedroom, Will could still feel her presence, even if she wasn't making it known. If anything, the fact that she was keeping quiet only made him more nervous. He didn't know what it meant. What she was up to. What was happening.

Trying to distract himself from the feeling that he was being watched, Will wondered what he could do to both thank Hannibal for helping him and apologize to him without actually saying either phrase. Will wasn't good with words. Wasn't good with anything remotely related to feelings or expressing them. Which, according to Hannibal, was indicative of "stunted emotional growth" and was something that needed to be addressed, but if he thought Will was really going to change how he was now, at thirty-six, almost thirty-seven years old, then he was fooling himself. No, Will would do what he always did when he felt bad or wanted to show he cared - he'd do something for Hannibal. Find something to fix for him. Prove to Hannibal how much he meant to him.

The problem was, Will didn't think there was really anything Hannibal needed or even *wanted* him to do. There was nothing broken, nothing loose, nothing that needed to be repaired. If he wasn't such a bad cook, Will would have made him dinner, but it seemed cruel to force Hannibal to sit through a meal that would be mediocre at best, one that he no doubt could have made so much better than Will ever could. He thought about surprising Hannibal with soft music and a trail of candles leading to the bedroom, but cringed at the idea just as quickly as it came to him and discarded it completely.

It was only once he pushed the bedroom door open and he saw the state the room was in that Will realized what he could do.

He quickly gathered all the clothes that were scattered over the floor and threw them in the laundry basket. The ones that were draped across the bed or over the back of the chair he carefully folded and put away. Then he tugged the rumpled bed sheets back into place and straightened the quilt. Will frowned when he finished with the bed - it didn't look as nice as when Hannibal made it…

Deciding that it was better than leaving it unmade, Will grabbed the laundry basket and took it back to the kitchen, where he left it in front of the closet that housed the washer and dryer. He'd let Hannibal deal with that - the last thing he wanted was to accidentally ruin something by washing it under the wrong setting.

Will turned and surveyed the kitchen. A collection of dirty dishes, left over from last night, was gathered in and around the sink, waiting to be washed. It was odd seeing the kitchen so messy when Hannibal usually kept it immaculate, pristine. Will felt another stab of guilt at the thought, wondering if he was the cause and suspecting he was. He made quick work of the pile of dishes before wiping down the countertops and cabinets and then sweeping the floor. Kitchen done, he then went to the sitting room, his heart thumping uncomfortably in its bone cage as he passed the stairs to the second floor.

He couldn't explain why, but it felt like she was nearby. Like she was watching him. Waiting for something...

Will forced himself to ignore the goosebumps that erupted up and down his arms and began putting the room back in order. He fluffed the pillows (feeling incredibly self-conscious and ridiculous as he did), threw the throw blanket over the back of the couch, and then moved over to Hannibal's desk, where a stack of papers were strewn haphazardly over the surface. Will frowned, bending over to pick these up and shuffling them into a neat pile. As he lifted the last page from the desk, Will was surprised to find a particular blue booklet laying underneath. He stared down at it, hardly daring to believe what he was seeing.

'Passport' The booklet declared in gold lettering across the front. 'United States of America.'

Will picked it up with shaking, excited fingers. Hannibal had finally gotten a fake ID. When did he...where? Why hadn't he told Will he had one? When was he going to tell him? Was he planning on telling him tonight? Was that why he had to run into town for the day? Why he had left without straightening the house? Was it supposed to be a surprise? Was there something wrong?

Unable to help himself, Will flipped it open…

His blood ran cold when he saw the photo inside.

He recognized it immediately. How could he not? It was the same picture he had helped set up. The one they had taken in Yuri's office.

This was Yuri's work. His fake ID.

Why…how…what…

What was this doing in their house? Why did Hannibal have it? *How* ? They had left. They had left without the ID. Hannibal had refused to pay for it. And Will had made him leave the next morning. So when had he…

Had Hannibal changed his mind? Will couldn't imagine he had, but maybe he had been desperate. Maybe he had gone back to Atlanta at some point and paid whatever it was Yuri had asked for...but when? When could he have possibly done it? There was no way he could have driven all the way to Atlanta and back while Will was working at the bar. In fact, there wasn't a single instance Will could think of that he could possibly have had that much time to himself. So then when…

Will glanced back down at the desk, at the stack of papers there, wondering if some clue hidden was among them. He tossed the passport back down and grabbed the stack, flipping through it impatiently.

Water bill…electric bill…credit card bill…receipt…receipt…recipe…psychology article… cell phone bill…recipe…

Nothing. There was nothing that explained where the passport came from, when Hannibal had gotten it.

With a sigh, Will dropped his head, and allowed the papers to fall from his hands. He watched them as they went fluttering to the ground, spinning elegantly through the air as they descended…

And it was as he was looking down that Will noticed the corner of a paper sticking out of the desk.

He frowned, crouching down to see it better.

The paper was poking out of a thin gap between the surface and the body of the desk, disappearing deep inside it. It took Will a few seconds to realize just what he was looking at, to remember what Hannibal had told him.

It's from Vienna. And it has quite the history behind it. It belonged to the daughter of a nobleman…But she had fallen in love with another man - a lowly carpenter. Naturally, their love was forbidden, and the girl's father went to great lengths to keep them apart...the story goes that it was the carpenter who built the desk for her, and that he built a secret compartment…

Will grabbed the paper and pulled it free, running his finger over the impossibly thin gap it had come from. But no matter where he looked or how hard, he couldn't figure out how to open the hidden compartment - there was no sign of a hinge, a catch, nothing. Frustrated, he glanced down at the paper he held crumpled in his fist.

It was a newspaper article - carefully cut from the 'Atlanta Journal'. When Will saw the headline, he felt something inside him slam shut.

Murder of Bodega Owner: Revenge or Hate Crime?

Will was aware, vaguely, that he was shaking. He felt curiously numb, detached from himself, as he continued to read.

Police remain baffled by the gruesome, unsolved murder of Yuri Ivanov, who was found in his Adams Park property on the early morning of December 29th by his employee, Boris Khrushchev. And given the statements made at a recent press conference regarding the matter, it is likely that they will continue to remain baffled for a long time.

'There are no leads.' Captain Jerome Banks revealed to reporters. 'Quite frankly, I've never seen anything like this case before.'

Indeed, there hasn't been a murder like this one in anyone's recent memory: Ivanov's nude body was discovered in his basement office, secured to his desk chair by an electrical cord. The man's genitals had been removed and then shoved into his mouth. The coroner was unable to determine the exact cause of death, but it is believed that after the organ was removed, Ivanov's killer waited until he had lost enough blood before using it to suffocate him. No fingerprints, fibers, hairs, or DNA was recovered from the scene, and security cameras were not working at the time. In regards to evidence, it seems there simply isn't any.

Initially, police believed the murder to be motivated by anti-immigrant sentiments (Mr. Ivanov moved to the United States from Russia in 2003), but now, they aren't so sure. Among Ivanov's personal effects, detectives recovered a shocking amount of pornigraphic material, including a number of Polaroid photographs of local children that Mr. Ivanov is believed to have taken himself.

'It's possible we're seeing the work of a vigilante.' Deputy Chief Ken Wilson says. 'Either one of Ivanov's victims or a family member or close friend of one of the boys he molested. Someone who knew what he was doing and decided to take it upon themselves to do something about it.'

Though police have not released the names of the victims to protect their privacy, many residents have expressed sympathy for the boys and disgust for what happened to them.

'If I had known what he was doing to those boys, I guarantee you I would have done a whole lot worse to him.' States Derrick Davis, whose nephew lives only a block away from Ivanov's bodega.

'I'm glad he's dead.' Says Geraldine Stewart, Ivanov's neighbor. 'Way I see it, he got exactly what was coming to him.'

And while most believe that the world is a safer place without Ivanov in it, there are some who disagree with the way the problem was solved.

‘Killing him let him off easy.’ Argues Fred Calhoun. ‘Should have sent him to prison for the rest of his life - made his life hell the same way he made those boys’ lives hell.’

But one thing that everyone can agree on, is that it is very unlikely we will ever know who killed Yuri Ivanov.

‘This is a very bizarre case and a very delicate situation.’ Says former Vice Squad Captain Mick Grimes. ‘Not only is there no evidence to solve the case, there’s also the simple fact that most people don’t necessarily *want* it to be solved. We’re talking about the murder of a child molester. People don’t want justice for him, they want justice for his victims. So even if the police do manage to find the killer, prosecuting him will likely be seen as a betrayal to the people. If police want to avoid public outrage, it might be better if they don’t try too hard to solve it.’

There were three pictures featured in the article. One of Yuri, one of his bodega, and one of former Captain Mick Grimes. Will felt an uncomfortably sharp jolt when he saw Grimes’ picture. He recognized him - he was the man at the St. Regis bar, the one who had thought Will was a prostitute. The photo was captioned ‘Mick Grimes, former Atlanta vice squad captain and founder of the charity organization Second Chance’. As Will stared at the black and white image, the small print, Mick’s words suddenly came swimming back to Will with dizzyingly clarity.

‘ *Buy ya a drink, kid? You look like you could use it...No offense, but I’ve been in this business a long time. I think I know it when I see it...technically, I’m retired now. But I still keep tabs where I can. You ever decide you have enough of him just give me a call. Trust me, I’ll make sure you’re taken care of…’*

A vice detective. Mick had been a *vice detective* . He hadn’t been trying to hit on Will that night, he had been trying to save him. Because that had been his job, once. To notice when people were in trouble and to do something about it.

Bile rose up Will’s throat and he began to tremble where he stood, his legs threatening to give out on him as he dropped the clipping. It fluttered to the ground, the bold, black print glaring mockingly up at him.

The article was dated January 8th. That meant it had been printed over a week after Yuri’s body was discovered. There had to be more. There had to be at least one report from December, one that had been printed closer to the day the murder occured.

And if there was, then Hannibal was sure to have it.

Will looked away from the article at his feet over to Hannibal's desk.

Does it open?

Only with the key.

I'm guessing it was lost.

So it would seem…

So it would seem. Those had been the words he'd used. Not a yes, not a no. A vague answer, an implied answer, one that Hannibal had allowed Will to draw his own conclusions about. And Will had done exactly what Hannibal wanted - he had assumed he meant that the key was lost, and with it, so was the secret compartment.

The truth was probably that Hannibal had the key. That he'd had it all along. And without it, the desk couldn't be opened.

At least…not easily.

Will found himself turning on his heel and drifting, dreamlike, out the front door to the detached garage.

When his fingers curled around the handle of the sledge hammer, it didn't feel real. When he carried it back into the house, he was barely aware of its weight in his hands.

And when Will raised the sledgehammer above his head, gripping the handle tight as he stared down at the beautiful desk, all he could think about was the first time he'd asked Hannibal about it.

Are we destined for tragedy?

Is ours a love story, Will?

Will closed his eyes as he brought the hammer down.

I don't know.

As Will had suspected, Hannibal had an entire collection of articles hidden inside the desk. Most of them were fairly brief, just a few paragraphs summarizing the progress of the investigation (which was essentially 'none' in each report he read). The only one that offered anything even potentially useful was the one from December 29th, the day Yuri had been found. It included a detailed account of the scene and a picture of Yuri's basement, after his body had been removed from it. But Will refused to look at it too closely, terrified of what he'd see if he did.

An addition to the stack of clippings, Will also pulled a familiar, wooden box from what was left of the desk. Inside, he found the fake Russian birth certificate, US citizenship papers, driver's license, and social security card that Yuri had made for Hannibal. It was all there. Everything they had needed to leave. Hannibal had had it the whole time.

Will closed his eyes, exhaled slowly.

It was obvious Hannibal had killed Yuri. But what Will didn't understand, what he couldn't figure out, was when - just when had he done it? He hadn't had the chance to do it when they had been in Atlanta. Will had been with him the entire time and they had left the next morning as soon as they could - so when could he have possibly done it?

'But you weren't with him the entire time, were you?' The dark, nasty little part of himself whispered. 'After you were drugged, you were completely out of it all night. That's an awful lot of time that you lost. And who knows what Hannibal was doing then…'

No. Will had been sick. Drugged. Hannibal had been worried about him. He wouldn't have left Will alone, not when he was so vulnerable. Not when Hannibal hadn't known what had happened to him, what was wrong with him, what could happen to him if someone wasn't there with him, watching out for him.

Unless…

No.

No .

Will refused to believe it. Didn't want to believe it. It made no sense. Hannibal wouldn't have done that, not to him. He loved him. Will knew he loved him. He wouldn't…

He would. Will knew he absolutely would.

Ghosts are born of regret, Will. And I have none.

No regret. No mercy. No pity.

Will felt lightheaded as he leaned over and picked up the December 29th article again, like he was either going to throw up or pass out, knowing what he had to do, what he was likely

about to find out. He took a deep breath before he forced himself to look at the picture of Yuri's office, really look at it - the scene of the crime.

I interpret the evidence - that's what he had always told everyone. And it was true..but it was so much more than that.

Will stared down at the grainy image before him, eyes scanning Yuri's cluttered desk, the bloodstains on the back of Yuri's chair, the spatters on the wall behind it. Looking down at it, he felt as though he were standing on the edge of a great cliff, getting ready to let himself fall. All the evidence he needed was there. Everything he needed to know was at his fingertips.

So do it. Interpret the evidence.

Will didn't want to. He never did.

But he did it anyway.

With a deep breath, Will closed his eyes.

The pendulum began to swing.

Hannibal hated Yuri from the moment he met him. He had taken one look at his oily, simpering smile and knew exactly what he was, had felt disgust, contempt, unfold somewhere deep within the pit of his stomach and settle heavily there. But outwardly, he remained cool, unbothered. Yuri had something he needed. He endured him with faint smiles and polite but empty words and hoped he wouldn't have to endure his presence any longer than he had to.

It was only once Yuri turned his blood-shot, greedy eyes on Will that Hannibal's patience for him faltered. And when Will found the box of photographs...when Hannibal saw just how upset Yuri had made Will, well..that was too much. Hannibal could tolerate a lot of things, but he could not tolerate Will suffering at anyone's hands but his own.

Thou shalt not suffer a pig to live…

He had planned on killing Yuri as soon as he had what he needed from him. But of course, Will felt differently about the matter. The poor boy had been upset, for reasons Hannibal couldn't begin to fathom. He appreciated, to an extent, Will's reluctance to draw attention to themselves. And he could understand his fear of Jack Crawford finding them. But what Hannibal didn't understand was Will's complete lack of faith in him. It frustrated him, Will's unease, his demands. But after seeing how distraught Will was, he had been willing to make an exception for him. He would let Yuri live.

Or at least, he had been planning on it.

Because when Hannibal and Will returned to the bodega later that night, Yuri did something unforgivable. Something Hannibal simply couldn't let stand, no matter what Will said, no matter how he felt about it.

"There's something we need to discuss." Yuri said when he finished showing Hannibal the various documents. "Concerning the price."

"Price is no object." Hannibal reminded him, tone clipped. He was willing to pay anything to get away from Yuri as fast as he could, to never see him again.

"Oh." Yuri sighed with an obnoxious little pout. "I'm afraid this isn't a matter of *money* , Dr. Lecter."

Hannibal didn't give him the satisfaction of asking what it was a question of. He had simply stared, unblinking, watching Yuri shift uncomfortably in front of him and then finally break.

“In addition to the figure we discussed.” Yuri said. “I’m also going to require...a compensation fee, if you will. After all, I went to a lot of trouble making all these for you-”

“You most certainly did.” Hannibal agreed shortly. “What is it you want?”

Yuri looked him dead in the eye and smirked. “The chance to fuck Will Graham should suffice, I think.”

The rage that filled Hannibal was so sudden and so severe, it was a miracle Hannibal didn't strangle him on the spot. Instead, he managed a terse, “That’s not what we agreed.”

“Dr. Lecter, please try to understand. The original price was before I knew who I was helping - there is a great risk involved with undertaking you as a client, given the circumstances.”

It was as much a threat as it was a display of power, and it left Hannibal seething.

“Perhaps I’m wrong, but I seem to recall you saying that unfortunate circumstances are what keep your business running. Surely you’ve served people who were wanted by the police before.”

“Almost exclusively.” Yuri assured him smugly.

“And why should I be an exception?”

“Because I’m making an exception for *you* , Dr. Lecter. Normally, I wouldn’t accept someone as high profile as you as a client - it’s only fair that the final price reflects the risk I’m taking to help you. Not to mention I’ve put considerable work into your product. I don’t typically do this much for anyone. I simply want to be compensated accordingly.” There was a slight pause as Yuri slowly raised his eyes to Hannibal’s. “Or maybe…I just enjoy feeling powerful.”

It was clear what Yuri was doing - he had been ashamed when they had discovered his little secret, but even more than that, he was angry that Hannibal had held up a mirror to show him what he was when Yuri didn't want to see. Most people don't like being reminded of their faults and shortcomings. They avoid looking at their own darkness, the bad things they've done. Yuri was no exception. Will was no exception - Hannibal had spent years trying to help Will embrace his true nature and it still only felt like he was beginning to scratch the surface.

Shame is a powerful motivator. Hannibal had embarrassed Yuri. Hurt him.

So Yuri was going to hurt him in return in the only way he could - through Will.

And when Hannibal heard Will take a few uncertain steps closer, no doubt concerned, Hannibal reacted instinctively, trying to keep him as far away from Yuri as he could.

"Stay right there, Will." He barked.

He was relieved when, for once, Will obeyed him, and, desperate to shield him from what was happening, Hannibal leaned in closer, speaking to Yuri in whispered Russian.

"He's not involved." He said. "If you want to punish me, then fine, but leave him out of it."

"But, Dr. Lecter, that's precisely what I am doing." Yuri answered. "I know what he means to you - everyone does. The surest way to hurt you is to hurt poor Will, isn't it?"

"And you really think that I would *ever* allow you to hurt him?" Hannibal snarled. "That I'm going to agree and give you what you want?"

"I know what you are, Dr. Lecter. You're a psychopath. You're not capable of love. Not really. You may be fond of the boy, but that fondness only goes so far. If it's your life on the

line, I'm sure you'd give him up in a second if it meant saving your own skin. And I have something you need, Dr. Lecter. I have what you need to save your own skin."

"You're not the only one I can use. There are plenty of other people who can do what you do, who can help me."

"Do you really think anyone else would be willing to work with the FBI's most wanted?" Yuri asked. "Because I certainly have a hard time believing they would. And why would you use someone else when you know I'm the best and when I already have everything you need right here? You can have it all if you just let me have the boy for one night. Hell, I'll be generous - for just one hour."

He patted the stack of documents beside him, leaned closer and whispered in Hannibal's ear.

"You can be merciful." He purred. "Drug the boy. I don't mind. Make it so he doesn't know what's happening, so he won't remember. I'll be gentle with him, I promise. He won't feel a thing. He'll never realize what you did. Think about it, Dr. Lecter. You can have it all, everything you want - a new life, a life with Will. All I ask is for something in return."

Yuri then sat back and shook his head. "I'm sorry." He said, switching abruptly to English. "But that's my final price. Take it or leave it."

Hannibal could only remember feeling this angry one other time in his life. It took him a long time to finally find his voice again. "You drive a hard bargain, Mr. Ivanov." He said, keeping his voice quiet so Will wouldn't hear the way it shook with rage. "I'm afraid I'll need some time to consider it."

It was a lie. He had already made his decision.

He offered his hand. "It's been a pleasure doing business with you."

Walking out of the bodega was a blur. The only thing he was aware of was Will trailing after him to the car.

“Hannibal? What happened?”

He made the mistake of being honest with him. At least to an extent - he refused to tell Will what Yuri wanted, refused to dignify his disgusting request by repeating it aloud, but he made it clear what he intended to do to him in return. And of course Will was upset, angry with him.

So angry and angry enough that he threatened everything Hannibal was trying to achieve for them.

He didn’t regret choking Will - he wasn’t trying to hurt him, after all. He was just trying to keep him safe, trying to build a better life for them both, to give Will what he wanted. He had known Will didn’t trust him and that he would hate him for what he was going to do, what he was doing, but as far as Hannibal was concerned, the end justified the means.

He was surprised when Will agreed to cooperate - he had been fighting him every chance he got, it only made sense that he would continue to fight him over every little thing. Hannibal wished he had refused. It would have been easier if he had. But Hannibal didn’t dwell on it. He kept Will close with a firm grip. Shepherded him back to the room and intended to leave him there for the night while he dealt with Yuri.

But once again Will surprised him. He hadn’t realized just how important it was to Will that they let Yuri live. Didn’t anticipate just how far he was willing to go, what he was willing to do, to avoid risking the FBI’s attention.

When Will kissed him, Hannibal had been shocked. He thought for a moment - hoped - that it was real, but then it occurred to him what Will was trying to do. It angered him, because it reminded him of the last time Will played him.

He decided to push back. Will was scared. He could tell by the way he kissed him, the way he was shaking when he pressed against him, could smell the fear that was radiating off of him.

He was curious just how far Will was actually willing to go to deceive him, what he was willing to do to save Yuri. He shoved Will down on the bed. Fondled him briefly in his hand while Will laid stiff with terror beneath him.

He gave up a moment later when Will began to cry.

He couldn't do it. Couldn't be the reason Will cried. Not like this.

But there was another way.

"I want you to get dressed." He told Will. "I'm taking you downstairs for a drink…Don't worry, mylimasis. I won't leave you. Not when you're this upset."

When Will disappeared into the bathroom to get dressed, Hannibal retrieved his Gladstone bag from the pile of luggage that was brought up earlier. He mixed a cocktail of hallucinogens in a small vial and slipped it in his pocket.

Because he could be kind. He could be merciful.

But most of all, he could be cunning, deadly, when he had to be.

And he had to be.

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Hannibal was annoyed when they reached the bar - it was far less crowded than he had been expecting. Less people meant less confusion. More opportunity for someone to see and hear something that they shouldn't have. He frowned, but he decided he couldn't afford to deviate from the plan. He only had one chance to kill Yuri and it had to be that night.

Will was still upset with him. He had been pouting ever since they left the room. If it was any other time, Hannibal would have found it endearing, adorable. He would have teased him - seen if he could rile him up even more or charm him into forgiving him. But he couldn't that night - he needed to stay on task. He called Will out, asked him directly what he was angry about, and Will, predictably, avoided the subject. He asked Hannibal for a drink instead.

Which Hannibal was more than happy to provide.

"What would you like?"

"Just a whiskey."

"Neat? On the rocks?"

"Surprise me."

Hannibal had every intention to.

"Will do." He promised Will before heading over to the bar, where only one other customer, an old man in a shabby trench coat, was being served. Across the room, a group of men appeared to be engaged in a loud and lively debate, waving their arms emphatically about, liquor sloshing over the rims of their glasses and splattering on the floor. Hannibal saw the bartender eye them nervously as she was refilling the old man's beer. A broken glass seemed imminent.

"Excuse me, miss." Hannibal said once she'd finished and handed the drink back to the man at the bar. "I was wondering if you could help me when you get a chance."

She turned her attention away from the group and looked at Hannibal with wide, terrified eyes. She hesitated for just a moment before she answered. "Of course! What can I do for you?"

“Do you see that man over there?” Hannibal asked her, tilting his head back toward Will. She glanced over, nodded. “He’s very special to me.” Hannibal explained. The best lies are rooted in truth. “You have no idea what I had to do to convince him to meet me here tonight. I was wondering if you could help me…make this a night a little more memorable?”

As he was speaking, the man she had been helping before suddenly turned toward him. Hannibal pretended not to notice.

“Sure! What do you need?” The girl asked.

“I’d like to order a glass of Chianti and a whiskey for now.” Hannibal told her. “And in about thirty minutes, I’d like you to bring him another drink. Can you do that?”

“Absolutely!” She assured him, her smile faltering just slightly. “No problem!”

“Thank you.”

The man beside him was watching Hannibal openly now, studying him with a frown. Hannibal tried not to be annoyed by it.

“Sorry, before I forget - what kind of drink do you want me to bring him later? Another whiskey?”

“Scotch on the rocks.” Hannibal ordered. And then, because he couldn’t resist a good pun, he added, “With a twist.”

“You got it!”

It was as she was preparing his glass of wine and the whiskey that the old man finally addressed Hannibal.

“Interesting request.” He said in a slow Southern drawl that Hannibal had a hard time understanding. “This your first date? Or an anniversary?”

“Neither, actually.”

“Hmm.” The man hummed, around a sip of his beer. “A second drink brought out thirty minutes after the first. Seems oddly specific.”

“Yes, we’re on a tight schedule, I’m afraid.”

“You know, when I was a cop, I used to hear about set-ups just like that.” The man told him conversationally. “Usually happened whenever a man wanted to drug his date.”

Hannibal looked over at him sharply, but the man ignored him and gestured to Will.

“So, what’s the deal? He not into you that way? Can’t afford him? Is that it?”

Hannibal blinked, affronted. “I beg your pardon?”

“He’s a pretty little thing. But I’m guessing that means he costs quite a bit, am I right?”

“No, I’m afraid you’re mistaken.” Hannibal told him coldly as the bartender finally brought him his drinks and set them down in front of him on the counter. As he was speaking, Hannibal slipped the vial of hallucinogens from his pocket and into his hand. “He’s not a prostitute.”

The older man shrugged, downing the rest of his drink. “If you say so.”

“You want another beer, Mick?” The bartender interjected, holding out her hand for his empty glass.

“Thank you, darlin’.” The man - Mick - said, finally turning away from Hannibal. It was only when he did that Hannibal dumped the drugs into Will’s drink.

He’s the Devil, Mr. Graham. He is smoke.

Smoke and mirrors - that’s all Hannibal really was. Distraction. Look here, not there.

Will accepted the drink he brought him without any hesitation, and Hannibal watched intently as he took his first sip of the laced whiskey. He had thirty minutes until the bartender came by with the second drink, the decoy drink. Thirty minutes to keep Will distracted until the drug began to work.

He began counting down in his head.

He talked with Will. Tried to convince him one more time to let him kill Yuri. And of course Will said no. They discussed murder. Debated Will’s nature. And as they did, Hannibal pulled his phone out from his pocket. Under the table, he opened his phone’s sound settings. He waited, finger hovering over the “Ringtone” button. Waited until Will was at his most vulnerable before he leaned in, as if he was going to kiss him.

That was when he hit the button, and his ringtone erupted loudly from his phone. Hannibal had pulled away, muttering under his breath.

“I apologize, Will. Please excuse me. I don’t think Chiyoh would be calling me unless she had good reason to.” He lied smoothly, rising to his feet.

He didn't waste time leaving. He disappeared from the bar and down the hall. When he found a quiet sitting area tucked away in one corner, he sat himself down and closed his eyes. Sauntered down the halls of his memory palace for a while, enjoying himself, until he felt enough time had passed. Enough time for the bartender to have brought Will the second drink. Enough time for the drugs to take effect.

When he got back, the scotch was sitting on the table in front of Will, who seemed on edge.

"Everything okay?" Will asked him.

"Yes, everything's fine. What's that?"

If there was one way to get Will to do something, it was to tell him not to do it. Hannibal made a big show about the little tumbler between them, demanding that it be taken away. And sure enough, Will swallowed the whole thing in one go.

But of course, the ruse didn't stop there. It couldn't. A powerful cocktail of drugs was now circulating through Will's veins, and Hannibal had to get him back up to the room, give him the antidote, get him settled safely before he could go after Yuri. He convinced Will to come back up to the room with him, and when Will stood and swayed, Hannibal was pleased to see the drugs had finally kicked in.

He only just managed to get Will back to the room. The drugs hit him harder than Hannibal expected. But he got him back. Got him settled on the bed. Will sobbed the entire time, terrified.

"Don't leave me!" He had begged. "Don't let me burn! Please, please, don't let me burn!"

"You're not going to burn, Will." Hannibal promised him quietly, grabbing his Gladstone bag from across the room and preparing a syringe of physostigmine. "I won't let you."

Will vomited and then passed out shortly after that. Once he did, Hannibal stripped him of his clothes. The larger the muscle a drug is injected into, the faster it works. And Hannibal needed it to work fast to counteract the scopolamine poisoning. He injected it into the largest muscle in the body - the gluteus maximus.

Hannibal slid the needle into the muscle with ease and depressed the plunger. When he pulled the needle out, a small bubble of blood followed. He hesitated. He couldn't put a bandaid over the injection site or Will would notice and be suspicious. And if he put his boxers back on, the blood would stain the fabric. Will would see the stain and wonder what had happened, why he had been bleeding. In the end, Hannibal decided to lie - if Will was embarrassed he had found, he would usually drop a subject, avoid it at all costs. He left Will bare, and if he asked him why he was naked, Hannibal would tell him that he'd had an accident.

He stayed with Will long enough to know he was okay. He kept his hand on his chest, over his heart as it slowly faded to its normal rhythm. He counted his breaths, and when he was sure he was breathing normally again, Hannibal tucked the blankets firmly around Will, laid towels beneath him. He stroked his sleeping face, his brown curls before kissing him goodbye...

And then he left.

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I ambush Yuri in his office. It's the place where he has ambushed so many children before, the place where he feels untouchable, powerful. I'm going to take that from him. I will make sure that when he dies here, he feels completely helpless, the same way those boys did.

I've been doing it for so long, have done it so many times, that it's effortless. It's a well-rehearsed dance and I know exactly what to do. I subdue him quickly. Secure him to his chair. Gag him. We don't want to be interrupted. We don't want to disturb the neighbors. It would be rude.

It's not my design, what I do. But it seems fitting, using Will's design when it's Will that Yuri's insulted.

I make sure Yuri can watch what I'm doing. I want him to see. I want him to know what's happening to him. That he will die.

He screams behind the duct tape, but it's muffled. He sobs, pleads, and I ignore him.

Once I've made the cut, I retrieve the box of photographs Will found earlier. I hold up each photo for Yuri to see, whisper obscene fantasies in his ear, watch as his body does exactly what it's meant to do, as his heart pounds, sending a rush of blood to what's left of his groin in an effort to raise what's no longer there.

The blood gushes at first and eventually fades to a trickle. It doesn't take long before he's at death's door. And it's only then that I remove the tape and pry his slackened jaw open. I shove it inside, force it all the way down his throat, as far as I can.

He struggles, a weak convulsion that does nothing to help. He gags, sputters, fades.

I linger, debating whether or not to take a piece of him, but in the end I leave him as he is. Will is worried, after all, that if I kill, Jack will recognize my work. And if I take a part of him to eat, Jack will know it's me immediately. And besides…I miss Will. These past few hours without him have been far too long.

As I leave, I take the passport, the documents. It's the least Yuri owes me.

I arrive back at the hotel a little before five in the morning. Will is still sleeping, curled on his side as I left him. I check his pulse, and am reassured by the strong, steady beat beneath my fingertips. I brush his hair aside, smiling down at him fondly. I know he'll be angry with me, if he ever finds out what I've done. He won't understand that I did it for him. I don't want to tell him, would prefer to avoid the fight, but I know at some point that I'll have to. And someday, I will. Someday, when enough time has passed and it won't hurt him so much to hear what I've done.

Will whimpers in his sleep. I kiss his cheek and he sighs, soothed. When he wakes, I know he will want to leave as soon as possible. He's still afraid of what I'll do to Yuri and he'll want to get me as far away from him as fast as he can. He won't want to linger any longer than we have to.

It suits me fine.

I pull up a chair and sit beside him as the sun rises. As the morning drags on and Will begins to grow restless in his sleep, I slip out to fetch him some ice. He will no doubt be thirsty when he finally wakes - it's a common side effect of the drugs.

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Chiyoh was waiting for them when they arrived back at the house, and she knew the second she saw Will that something was wrong. She had been suspicious from the start, looking from Hannibal to Will and demanding to know what had happened. Because something had happened. She just couldn't figure out what it was. Hannibal managed to deflect her, but Will was weak, defenseless. She questioned him, and when Will told her that Hannibal wasn't able to get the ID, that Yuri had insulted him and demanded more money than he'd originally said, and that Will had been drugged not long after, she had thought, at first, that Will had drugged himself in an elaborate effort to get Hannibal out of Atlanta before he could retaliate against Yuri.

But when Will mentioned the phone call Hannibal had gotten at the bar, the call that had supposedly come from her, Chiyoh realized what must have happened, what had actually happened.

Because she didn't call Hannibal.

Which meant that Hannibal had lied to Will.

And if Hannibal had lied to Will, then it could only mean one thing: that it was Hannibal who had drugged Will. And if he had drugged Will, then that meant Hannibal would have had more than enough time to deal with Yuri.

That Yuri was most likely dead.

And Will had no idea.

She had been both horrified and terrified to realize the lengths that Hannibal was willing to go to - drugging Will, lying to the one person on earth he claimed he loved - in order to have his revenge. Because if Hannibal was willing to do that to Will, then what was he willing to do to her?

She couldn't stay. She didn't want to.

She was gone a week later.

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Will came back to himself with a gasp, his chest heaving, his eyes prickling, and sank slowly to the floor, kneeling amidst the scattered pages and splintered wood.

It had been Hannibal.

Hannibal had been the one who drugged him.

Hannibal had killed Yuri. Took the documents from him.

He had had them all along.

He had been lying to Will this entire time.

The whole time.

Will had thought…had hoped…

None of it had been real.

It was Hannibal. It was all Hannibal.

It was all a lie.

Chapter End Notes

Just gonna leave this here...

Banshee: a female spirit in Irish folklore who heralds an impending death or tragedy usually by screaming, wailing, shrieking, or keening.

True Pain I Don't Deserve

Chapter Summary

Will confronts Hannibal

Chapter Notes

Hello, friends! And welcome back to another episode of 'What Not to Do in A Relationship'.

Before we begin, just be warned that this chapter does feature suicidal ideation. Personally, I don't think it's that bad/graphic, but I'd prefer to be safe than sorry.

And now, back to the shit show.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The sound of the key turning in its lock seemed incredibly loud in the still and silent house.

“Will?” Hannibal called out a moment later. “Will! Where are you, my darling?”

Will closed his eyes and released a long, slow breath. He had known that hearing Hannibal’s voice, that seeing him again, would be painful.

He just hadn’t realized that it would hurt this much.

“Will?”

With his eyes shut and the world dark, Will listened as Hannibal came striding down the hall and into the kitchen. He touched the cold metal of Chiyoh's gun at his hip to reassure himself it was still there as the footsteps came steadily closer and closer. There was a pause, and then the soft rustle of cloth, the gentle clinking of glass against glass. Hannibal must have gone to the store, Will realized as he sat there, waiting. He forced himself to draw another deep breath. He didn't open his eyes again until he heard the bedroom door swing open, and when he did, he found Hannibal standing before him.

It was agony just looking at him.

Hannibal smiled, unaware of Will's suffering or the fact that it was his doing, unaware that everything had changed while he was gone.

"There you are, mylimasis." He said warmly, relieved. "I was worried when I saw your truck outside - you're never home this early. Did something happen? Did Ronny finally fire you?" He sounded eager, delighted by the possibility, and he didn't even bother trying to hide it.

Will sat unmoving on the bed, trapped between a wave of unspeakable sadness and a flare of hot, sharp anger.

Because wasn't that just like Hannibal to crave disaster? To be unapologetically petty and jealous in his love for Will, and so openly opposed to sharing him with anyone else?

As much as Will had always pretended to hate it, secretly, he had loved it.

He hated Hannibal for taking it away from him.

He was really, *really* going to miss it.

Will swallowed, his throat dry.

“Water main break.” He said quietly. “Ronny sent me home.”

He was surprised by how calm and cold his voice sounded, how unlike it usually was.

Hannibal seemed surprised too, because he inclined his head a bit when he heard it, studying Will closely.

“Ah.” He said after a moment. “Well, how serendipitous for us then, that we’ve been given the evening to spend together instead of apart.”

Will didn’t answer him, and Hannibal frowned, however slightly. He seemed puzzled, like he wasn’t sure what was happening, why Will was acting the way he was, or what to do about it. And if Will wasn’t so angry, he might have been amused to see Hannibal so obviously out of his depth for once, but at the moment, he was finding it difficult to enjoy. A few beats of awkward silence passed between them.

‘Ask me.’ Will begged him silently. ‘Just ask me what’s wrong and I’ll tell you.’

But of course, Hannibal didn’t. “The house looks nice.” Was what he tried next with a small smile that seemed forced. “Thank you for straightening it up for me.”

“Don’t thank me. I’m sure you could have done a much better job than me.” Will told him, his tone utterly flat and emotionless, impossible to read.

Hannibal blinked. “I doubt that’s true.” He said it cautiously, as if he knew Will was upset but wasn’t sure why and he didn’t want to accidentally make it worse. “I appreciate it very much.”

“Hmm.” Will hummed, unimpressed. “...I take it, then, that you didn’t see the sitting room when you came in?”

“No.” Hannibal said slowly. “Why? Did something happen…?”

He trailed off as Will suddenly pushed himself to his feet, watching as Will crossed the room and wordlessly brushed past him into the hall. The gun felt heavy at his side. He wondered if Hannibal had noticed it. Probably - there wasn’t much Hannibal didn’t notice. The real question was whether or not Hannibal was alarmed by the sight. Again, probably not - there wasn’t anything that alarmed Hannibal and even if there was, he had asked Will to keep the gun on him at all times. If Hannibal was uneasy about anything at all, it probably had more to do with how Will was acting than the fact that he had a gun on him.

But however Hannibal felt, whatever he was thinking, he nevertheless followed faithfully after Will down the hall to the sitting room. And Will, despite having his back to Hannibal, despite knowing what he was capable of, and despite the fact that he had no idea what would happen next or what he would do, felt strangely calm as he led the way, Hannibal’s quiet footsteps not far behind him.

As he slipped into the sitting room, when he at last saw what lay inside, Hannibal stopped suddenly, and Will felt his heart clench painfully in his chest.

This was it - no going back now. Nothing would ever be the same between them after this.

The mangled remains of the desk were as Will left them, the various papers strewn across the surrounding carpet. Will stood glaring down at it all, hands curled into trembling fists.

“Is there something you want to tell me?” He whispered, keeping his back firmly to Hannibal, refusing to look at him. “Anything you think I should know?”

Hannibal didn’t answer him right away, and Will could easily imagine his dark eyes moving carefully over his rigid form, his face expressionless, giving away nothing, as he considered his options. “You found the documents.” He said at last.

“No shit.” Will spat.

“What did you do with them?”

Rather than answer, Will jerked his head toward the couch, where the ornate box was sitting innocently. He could hear Hannibal moving behind him and then there was the soft creak of the box’s hinge as he opened it, checking the contents inside.

“Were you ever going to tell me?” Will asked.

“Eventually, yes.” Hannibal told him as he closed the box again.

“When?” Will asked coldly. “When the FBI finally came banging on our door?”

“Will, I understand you’re angry-”

“Angry?” Will scoffed. “Angry doesn’t even begin to cover it.”

“Will-”

“You lied to me! You’ve been lying to me for weeks!”

“I know. Will, please, just let me explain-”

Will felt Hannibal’s fingers brush against his arm, and with a snarl he seized the gun and whipped around to face Hannibal at last. “Don’t touch me!” He shouted, pointing the muzzle at Hannibal’s chest, his heart. Hannibal froze, looking first at the gun and then back at Will.

“Will,” He began, voice maddeningly gentle, as though Will were a confused child or a traumatized dog, but Will shook his head.

“Be quiet!” He snapped. “You don’t get to talk right now. You don’t get to talk to me. Not anymore. Not after what you did.”

Hannibal pressed his lips together in a tight line, watching Will as he forced himself to take a couple deep breaths.

“Do you remember,” Will asked after a moment, his voice soft, quiet. “That I said if I ever found out you had lied to me again, that I would kill you?”

“...I remember.” Hannibal assured him, just as quietly.

Will swallowed hard. “And you did it anyway.”

“I did.”

Will felt his throat begin to swell, and the gun rattled in his shaking hands. “W-Why?” He asked, pleading. “Why did you do it?”

“You know why.” Hannibal said. “I did it for you.”

Will shook his head. “No. Don’t you dare blame me for what you did.” He hissed.

“I’m not blaming you.” Hannibal told him. “I needed a passport to take you away from here, Will. And Yuri wouldn’t give me one unless…unless I gave him you. That’s what he wanted. That was his price - to have his way with you. After what that…that… *animal* demanded from you, I had to kill him.”

“Oh, please.” Will sneered. “That wasn’t about me. It was never about me. It was all about you. You wanted to kill him from the start. I was just your excuse to finally do it.”

“You know that’s not true.” Hannibal said forcefully, taking a small, half-step forward and stopping abruptly when Will cocked the gun. An ugly look, a murderous one, stole briefly across Hannibal’s features before he closed his eyes. “Yuri was never going to give us the ID, Will.” He said, eerily calm when he opened his eyes again. “Surely you know that.”

“We could have used someone else-”

“There was *no one else* , Will. We were on the FBI’s most wanted list. I’m the man who killed, ate, and served his victims to his unsuspecting dinner guests. I’m one of the - if not the - most infamous serial killers in the world. No one else would have been crazy enough to agree to help us. Yuri was our only option.”

Will didn’t answer him. There was some truth to what Hannibal was saying, he could see that. But he also knew Hannibal was capable of twisting things to his advantage, of manipulating him in ways he couldn’t always recognize. “But you couldn’t know that-”

“I did know it, Will.” Hannibal insisted. “I knew it then and I know it now. Just like you know I was right.”

Will shook his head. His eyes felt suspiciously, traitorously hot. “This isn’t about whether you were right or not.” He whispered. “It’s about what you did to me.”

Hannibal looked pained as his eyes danced from Will’s shaking hands, to his tightly bobbing Adam’s apple, to the moisture that was beginning to gather along his lashes. “I wasn’t trying to hurt you, Will.”

“Bullshit.” Will managed. “You *drugged* me. You gave me enough scopolamine to poison me-”

“You were never in any danger, Will. I had the antidote-”

“Hannibal, stop talking!” Will shouted. “You let me think I was roofied by some stranger! Do you have any idea what you put me through?! I was so scared - I didn’t know what was happening to me! I thought I was gonna die! And you knew I was scared and you didn’t care!”

“Will-”

“And then you *left* !” Will continued over him. “You left me! You left me alone after you drugged me so you could kill Yuri when I *asked* you not to! That was the *one* thing I asked you not to do and you couldn’t even give me that!”

To Will’s horror, his throat suddenly seized and a sob finally erupted out of him. Across the room, he saw Hannibal’s blank expression falter.

“Will?” He asked softly, taking another small step forward. Will shook his head.

“You lied!” He wailed. “You lied to me!”

“Shh.” Hannibal hushed, closing the distance between them. “I know. I know.”

Will allowed Hannibal to pull him into his arms. He didn’t fight when Hannibal pried the gun from his slack fingers. Because who was he kidding? He couldn’t kill Hannibal. He had already tried a dozen times before and he never could. Instead, he pushed his forehead into Hannibal’s chest, and Hannibal held him close as his cries eventually faded and died.

The two of them were quiet for a long time after that.

“You said,” Will said eventually, his voice still thick. “You said you were done lying to me. But you were lying to me this whole time. All you’ve ever done is lie to me. Ever since we met…you’ve been lying to me ever since we met. Everything we have is a lie.”

“No, Will.” Hannibal said, tightening his hold around him. “I admit I’ve lied to you about a lot of things, but I’ve never once lied to you about how I felt. I love you. I always have. You know that. You have to know that.”

Will felt his breath hitch threateningly. “I know.” He whispered.

Hannibal sighed, relieved to know Will knew. “I do.” He swore, pressing his forehead to the top of Will’s head. “I love you more than anything. More than life itself. There isn’t anything I wouldn’t do for you, Will.”

Will closed his eyes. “Except be honest with me.”

Hannibal stiffened.

“Things are different now.” He said quickly. “I wasn’t honest with you before but I will be now.”

“Yeah. You’ve said that before.” Will reminded him. “Not long after we first came here.”

“Will, I had no way of knowing about Yuri or what he would do.” Hannibal pointed out. “He was a problem that occurred unexpectedly and I reacted to it. Perhaps not in the best way, but I did what I honestly felt was best for us.”

“And what are you going to do the next time there’s a problem?” Will asked him tonelessly.

“There won’t be another problem-”

“There is *always* going to be another problem, Hannibal. That’s life.” Will snapped, pulling away from him at last and stalking a few feet away. He swiped at his damp cheeks. “And if you try to tell me there isn’t, then you’re either lying to me, *again* , or you are completely delusional.”

“All I mean is that the next time there is a problem, I’ll handle it better.”

Will shook his head. “You can’t promise me that.”

“I can.” Hannibal held. “Things have changed. We’ve changed. I didn’t have you like I do now and I was scared I never would. But I have you now. I have you and I’ll never let you go. I’ll never do anything that could risk me losing you.”

Will looked over at him. “Don’t you understand?” He asked softly. “You already have.”

Hannibal didn’t answer him at first. “Please don’t do this, Will. You don’t have to do this. We can fix it-”

“No, we can’t.” Will said, shaking his head. “We can’t fix it because it was never whole. We were broken from the start. We have nothing to fix.’

“That’s not true. What we had was real.”

“No. It wasn’t. Whatever we were, whatever it was we had, it was all based on a lie. There’s no foundation in that. There’s no future in that.” Will heaved a sigh. “And I can’t keep doing this to myself. I can’t keep letting you hurt me over and over again for the rest of my life.”

“I won’t-”

“You will.” Will said, feeling tears begin to gather in his eyes again. “You always have. You always do. You always will.”

“I’ve changed, Will.” Hannibal said. It sounded like he was begging. “You said so yourself. Don’t you remember?”

Do you believe you could change me the way I've changed you?

I already have.

"Yes." Will whispered, heaving a deep and shuddering breath. "But it's not enough."

"There isn't anything I wouldn't do for you, Will. Whatever you want, I'll do it."

"I never wanted anything!" Will said, choking on another sob. "All I ever wanted was for you to be honest with me! I didn't need anything else from you!"

"Will." If Will didn't know any better, he would say Hannibal was frantic. "I promise you I will be! Look at me, mylimasis, please!" He waited until Will raised his head and fixed him with his watery gaze. "I will do everything I can to make this up to you. Whatever you want, whatever you need, I'll do it. Please. Let's just sit down and talk about this."

He moved closer, his hands outstretched toward Will, but Will stepped back.

"No." Will said. "No. I don't want to sit down with you. I don't want you to lie to me again. I don't want it to hurt anymore. I'm tired." He dropped his gaze. "I'm so tired of it all."

Hannibal's face was terrifyingly blank as he stared at Will. For a few moments, neither of them spoke. They just stood there looking at each other.

And then, like a cobra striking, Hannibal's arm shot out and he seized Will by the throat, shoving him against the wall.

Will didn't flinch, didn't cry out, didn't so much as blink in protest. He let Hannibal press against his airway tighter and tighter and he didn't fight. He just stared at Hannibal

pleadingly.

‘Do it.” He prayed. ‘Put me out of my misery. Please.’

He could tell Hannibal wanted to. He could see it in the way he was looking at him, the desperation that was just below the icy surface of his dead eyes. Could feel it in the way his fingers dug into his flesh, hard enough to draw blood…

It occurred to Will then that he hadn’t seen what Hannibal had done with the gun when he took it from him. He had no idea where it was. He wondered vaguely if Hannibal would use it to kill him, but he didn’t think he would - if Hannibal did kill him, it would be far more intimate than that.

Hannibal’s hold tightened, and Will tensed, expecting the worst.

But to his surprise, Hannibal’s shoulders suddenly slumped. “I can’t do it.” He murmured, releasing Will and taking a few steps back from him. “I can’t do it. Not to you.”

He collapsed on the couch beside the little wooden box. Will didn’t move from where he was, watching Hannibal as he heaved a great sigh.

“What are you planning to do now?” Hannibal asked him, his voice barely more than a whisper. “Are you leaving New Orleans?”

“...Not yet.” Will told him. His voice was raspy. “Ronny’s surgeon told him he could resume his normal routine in a few weeks. I’m gonna ask Nadine if I can stay with her until then.”

A shadow passed over Hannibal’s face. “No, you’re not.” He all but spat. “You’re not staying with her.”

Will laughed mirthlessly. “Where else am I supposed to go, Hannibal?”

“You’re not going anywhere.” Hannibal told him. “You’ll stay here.”

“I’m not staying here with you-”

“You’re not. I’ll go.”

Will looked at him narrowly, not trusting him. “Go where?”

Hannibal smiled at him wryly. “I’m not sure. This is all very sudden. I’m sorry to say I wasn’t expecting it and don’t have any plans. But New Orleans is a popular tourist destination and we’re in the off season. I’m sure I could find a hotel somewhere.”

“And after?” Will asked him nervously. “Where will you go once you leave New Orleans?”

Hannibal looked sad. “I don’t know, sweetheart. It doesn’t matter. Wherever I go, my life will be empty, pale, and bleak if I don’t have you there with me.”

“You’re not going to guilt me into changing my mind.”

“I wasn’t trying to ‘guilt’ you into anything, Will.” Hannibal said. “I was merely stating a fact.”

Hannibal had left the room at some point. To pack, he’d said. Will wasn’t entirely sure when that was - everything seemed sort of hazy around the edges, as if Will had slipped into the un-reality of a dream.

‘Except it’s not a dream.’ He thought, rubbing his eyes. ‘It’s not even a nightmare. It’s so much worse than that - it’s real.’

Will sighed, standing beside the pile of splintered wood, his arms crossed protectively around his middle.

‘Each man kills the thing he loves.’ He found himself reciting miserably. ‘And given what we are, it was only a matter of time before one of us finally did.’

It seemed like forever before Hannibal finally returned, a single suitcase in hand, which he set by the front door. Will stared at it for a moment before looking back at him.

“You’re really leaving?” He asked. He hadn’t quite believed it when Hannibal told him he was.

“I am.” Hannibal said. It was impossible to tell what he was thinking, what he was feeling. “I bought this house for you, after all. It was a gift. To take it back now would be incredibly rude of me.”

“Why stop? You were on a roll.” Will reminded him bitterly. “What with all the lying and drugging me against my will and all.”

A hint of a smile graced Hannibal’s lips before he grew serious again. “Please keep your phone.” He urged Will. “In case you ever need anything, in case…”

He stopped then, but Will could easily guess what he would have said: ‘In case you ever change your mind.’

“I doubt I’ll need it.” Will told him.

Hannibal shrugged. “You never know. Stranger things have happened.”

At least Will could agree with him on that. He watched as Hannibal took a few steps closer to him. “May I ask,” He said hesitantly, “For one small favor before I go?”

Will frowned at him, and Hannibal licked his lips, a small, quick flicker of his tongue.

“If it’s not too much to ask,” He continued. “Could I...could you just tell me...truthfully...did you ever love me? Even just a little bit?”

Will stared at him disbelievingly, feeling as if his insides were snapping, breaking, collapsing in upon themselves.

It was true Will had never told Hannibal he loved him. And he probably never would have - it wasn’t his way. But still, he had thought Hannibal had known how he felt. Because wasn’t it obvious? Hadn’t Hannibal suspected, guessed, his true feelings every time Will climbed into bed with him and wiggled into his arms? Every time he passed him his cup of morning coffee or curled up beside him on the couch? The first time he had kissed him, every time he opened himself to Hannibal, allowed him to sink so deeply inside of him?

Will swallowed and pressed his trembling lips tightly together. Because he was still angry, still hurt, and he wanted to hurt Hannibal the way he had hurt him. And it would hurt Hannibal more than anything to give him a non-answer. To leave him always wondering, never knowing for sure, than to simply tell him ‘yes’ or ‘no’.

Hannibal sighed, and for one insane, split second, Will thought he would cry too. But then he carefully rearranged his face and gave Will a small smile.

“Goodbye, Will.” He said softly, leaning forward and pressing a reverent kiss to Will’s forehead.

Will didn’t answer. He watched as Hannibal turned away from him and grabbed the handle of his bag. A part of him still didn’t believe that Hannibal was truly leaving. He remained motionless as Hannibal stepped outside and closed the door behind him. He listened to

Hannibal's footsteps as he crossed the porch. There was a minute or two of silence, and Will took a few shuffling steps to the door, wondering if Hannibal had changed his mind, if he would come back.

But then there was the unmistakable sound of a door slamming, an engine turning over, the soft crunch of gravel as a car backed out over their driveway. Will tugged the door open again and stepped outside, watching as Hannibal backed away.

'He's not really leaving.' He told himself as Hannibal paused. 'It's just a trick. He's coming right back.'

But Hannibal wasn't stopping. He was just switching gears. Then he turned the wheel...and began to pull away. Will remained frozen where he was.

'He's gonna turn around.' He thought, staring after Hannibal's car as it drove further and further away. 'He's gonna come back for me.'

It was only once Hannibal's car had disappeared over the horizon, when Will could no longer see him and he was left completely alone, that his legs finally gave out and he crumpled to the ground.

Will woke to the sound of his phone buzzing just a few inches from his ear. He groaned, and for a moment he was confused, wondering what was happening, where he was.

And then it all came rushing back to him.

He grabbed the phone and shoved it to his ear.

“H-hello?” He croaked. His voice was still hoarse from Hannibal choking him the day before.

“...Kid?” It wasn’t Hannibal on the other end. It was Ronny. He sounded shocked. “Are ya alright?”

Will licked his chapped lips. “Yeah. Yeah I’m alright.”

“You sound awful. Where the hell are you?” Ronny asked him. “I was expectin’ ya to be here hours ago!”

Will rolled over to check the time. He couldn’t remember going to bed. “S-sorry.” He mumbled, wincing when he saw how late it was. “I meant to call you. I can be there in an hour-”

“No.” Ronny said firmly. “Just stay home. You’re obviously not feelin’ well. And the last thing I want and need is you gettin’ my customers sick.”

“Are you sure?” Will asked him. He didn’t really care either way what Ronny wanted him to do. “If you need help-”

“It’s fine, kid. I’ve got this.” Ronny told him. “Just...get better. Text me tomorrow and let me know if ya can make it in or not, okay?”

“Okay.” Will sighed.

“Christ, you really do sound bad. I hope that good-for-nothin’ boyfriend of yours is at least takin’ decent care of ya.”

Will’s throat clenched. “...We, um, we broke up.”

A beat of silence passed.

"...Oh." Ronny said. "I'm...I'm sorry to hear that." He fell briefly quiet again, as though he wasn't sure what to say. "You, uh, ya want me to get Nadine to come over and check on ya?"

"No, it's fine. I'm fine." Will said firmly, closing his eyes. He didn't want to be around anyone right now. "I'll probably be better by tomorrow."

"Okay." Ronny said, sounding extremely doubtful of this. "Well, ya take care, kid. Call me if ya need anything, okay?"

"Okay." Will agreed again before quickly hanging up. He tossed the phone aside and rolled away from it, away from Ronny, or anyone else who might call.

The sun was out, dazzlingly bright in the late afternoon. Will watched the light play along his wall for a while, and then closed his eyes. He didn't want to see it.

He fell back asleep eventually.

As he was drifting off, a part of him hoped he wouldn't wake up again.

Will had to stop for gas on his way to the bar. When Nadine saw him, she frowned.

"Will?" She said worriedly, setting her phone aside and rising to her feet. "Honey, are you okay?"

“I’m fine.” Will told her, ducking his head so she couldn’t see his pale face, the bruise-like shadows under his red eyes. “I’m at pump two-”

“Well, hold on, now.” She said. “Talk to me - what’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” Will told her, shuffling his feet. “Just a little sick is all.”

“Well, then, ya shouldn’t be goin’ into work, honey.” Nadine said. “You should be home in bed.”

“I already told Ronny I’d come in.”

“Ya want me to call him for ya?” Nadine asked with a wicked grin. “I’ve been waitin’ for an excuse to call him up and tear him a new one for a while now.”

“No, it’s fine.” Will said, still avoiding her eyes. “I’m fine, really.”

Nadine pursed her lips, studying him. “I can’t believe that boyfriend of yours let ya leave the house lookin’ bad as you do.” She informed him, and Will’s breath hitched. “God’s sake, can’t the man even *pretend* to care?”

“He’s gone.”

Nadine blinked. “What?”

“He left.” Will said. He bit his lip and tasted blood. “We...we had a fight, and I...he’s just...he’s gone.”

Nadine was quiet for a bit, and Will could tell she was considering her next words carefully, that she was trying not to upset him. “Oh, honey.” She sighed after a moment. “I’m sorry. I know it hurts.”

“I’m fine!” Will assured her with what he knew was an unconvincing smile. “Really, I’m okay.”

“No, you’re not.” Nadine said, stepping around her checkout desk and folding Will into her arms. He stiffened, but she patted him reassuringly. “It’s alright. You’re gonna be alright. You don’t need him.”

Will could feel the sob building in his throat at her words, and he quickly tugged himself free. “I need to get to work.” He managed. “I’m gonna be late.”

“Take a few days off, Will.” Nadine urged him. “Ronny will understand-”

“No.” Will said firmly. “No, I can’t just sit around all day thinking about him. I need a distraction, Nadine. I need it. If I don’t...I don’t know what I’ll do.”

“...Alright. If that’s what ya think is best, then you do what ya gotta do. I understand.” Nadine said softly. She reached up and cupped his cheek in her warm hand. “I’ve been through what you’re going through, Will. I know how ya feel. I know how hard it is. But I promise you it’s gonna get better. And until then, if ya ever feel like talkin’, if ya ever need anythin’, I’m here for ya. Okay?” She waited until Will nodded. “I mean it, boy, ya ever need anythin’, anythin’ at all, just let me know.”

Will nodded again at the floor and stepped away. “Thanks, Nadine.” He whispered.

“No need to thank me, honey. Now, how much gas you need?”

“Oh, um…”

“I’ll give you fifty.”

“Wait, I don’t think I have fifty-”

“That’s alright.” Nadine told him, moving behind the counter again. “I’m buyin’.”

“What? No, Nadine-”

“Yes.” Nadine said sternly. “It’s my gas station and I can do whatever I want with it. And don’t’chu sass me none about it neither.”

Will heaved a sigh. “Fine.” He muttered. “Thank you.”

“Anytime.”

“Bye, Nadine. Good seeing you.”

“Bye, honey.” Nadine called after him. “Just remember, you’ve got people thinking ‘bout’chu.”

Will didn’t trust himself to answer her as he slipped back outside.

Ronny seemed on edge when Will stepped inside the bar.

“Hey, kid.” He said, eyeing Will up and down from behind the counter. “How ya feelin’? You look like hell.”

“Gee, thanks.” Will drawled, hanging his raincoat on the hook by the door.

“Look, if you’re still sick, just go home, alright? No shame in somethin’ ya can’t help.”

“I told you I’m fine.” Will snapped, looking over at Ronny with a scowl. “If you don’t want me here then fine, but if you want me to work, then let me work.”

If he hadn’t known Ronny better, Will would have said that he hesitated before he answered. “Alright. Why don’t ‘cha wash and cut some lime wedges?” He suggested. “Can you handle that?”

“Yes.” Will said, rolling his eyes before disappearing to the store room in the back of the building. He grabbed a few limes and rinsed them off in the sink before carefully cutting them into quarters, then eighths. These he piled into a bowl and brought back to Ronny. “What next?”

Ronny was still looking at him like he expected him to fall over at any second.

“...Would you mind sweeping under the tables?” He asked. “Travis and his jackass dock friends enjoyed the whiskey and peanuts a little too much last night.”

“Sure.” Will said, disappearing into the back room again and grabbing a broom. He was aware of Ronny watching him closely as he dutifully swept the floors, but he ignored him, gathering the wrinkled peanut shells and pieces of napkin strewn under the tables and chairs into a neat little pile. After a while, he heard the clink of glass and knew Ronny had gone back to prepping the bar for the evening. Will breathed a small sigh of relief, feeling his shoulders sag hopelessly as he continued to sweep.

Life without Hannibal was hard enough as it was without having to pretend everything was fine.

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“You didn’t have to stay with me.” Will told Ronny as he locked the bar down. “I could have closed on my own.”

“Last I checked, I had a bum shoulder.” Ronny grumbled. “I ain’t so bad off that I can’t stay out and close my own damn bar.”

“I didn’t say you were bad off, Ronny.” Will sighed, testing the door. “I was just trying to do you a favor.”

“Hmph. I locked up this bar by myself way before you ever came along, kid, and I’ll do it again after you leave. You ain’t doin’ me any favors.”

“Good to know.” Will said as he finally turned away from the bar. He was exhausted, his head hurt, and he was in no mood to put up with anybody, especially Ronny. “In that case, you can lock up tomorrow night and I’ll take off early.”

“Then what the hell am I even payin’ ya for?” Ronny said, and though Will couldn’t see him in the dark, he thought he might be smiling. “Have a good night, kid.”

“Night.” Will mumbled back, knowing the next few hours would be long and miserable, wishing he could somehow jump ahead to the next day without having to spend the night alone. He followed Ronny across the parking lot and climbed reluctantly into his truck. He sat there for a while, long after Ronny had pulled away, dreading the thought of going home, of stepping into the empty house. He wasn’t sure how long he had been there before he felt the hairs on the back of his neck suddenly prickle.

Will looked up, and by the light of his headlights, saw another car across the parking lot. He squinted. He didn't recognize it, and the windows were tinted dark, too dark for him to make out who was inside. Will felt his heart stutter.

Was it…?

No. It wasn't Hannibal. He knew what Hannibal's car looked like and that wasn't it.

'It still might be him.' The stubborn, hopeful part of himself insisted. 'He may have rented a car. He'd definitely do something like that. If he didn't want you to know he was following you.'

Not that he had any reason to believe Hannibal was even still in New Orleans. He had no proof, no way of knowing for sure he was there...

But Will knew. He could feel it. He *knew* Hannibal was still somewhere in New Orleans.

But even if it was Hannibal, Will wasn't ready to talk to him just yet. He knew he'd fold the second Hannibal tried to convince him to take him back. Because he didn't want Hannibal back. He didn't. He wanted peace. He wanted normalcy, or however close he could come to it. He didn't want Hannibal and all he promised if Will stayed with him. He didn't want the agony of loving Hannibal.

Will grabbed the gear shift and yanked it roughly into drive. He quickly pulled away. And as he was turning out of the lot, Will glanced at his rearview mirror, at the strange car that was still parked in front of the bar. A part of him had been expecting it to follow him, but it remained where it was, unmoving. Will frowned.

Maybe he was wrong. Maybe it wasn't Hannibal after all.

But if it wasn't...then who was it?

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Will’s stomach growled, angry and loud. He ignored it, burying his face deeper into Hannibal’s pillow.

It still smelled like him. It was faint, but it was definitely there - just enough to notice and the only thing able to lull him to sleep at night.

Will didn’t want to even think about what he would do once the smell faded completely away.

His stomach growled again, and he wrapped an arm around it, trying to muffle the sound. He hadn’t eaten anything in two days. He was so hungry now it was painful, but he couldn’t bring himself to care - the thought of getting up, of dragging himself to the kitchen and actually having to make himself something to eat, the thought of just *deciding* what he wanted, was exhausting. It would be better if he just remained where he was. He was comfortable here, in Hannibal’s bed, curled under his blankets. He didn’t want to move. He never wanted to move again.

Will closed his eyes. How was he supposed to do this? How was he supposed to live without Hannibal? How was he supposed to face each new day, every night, alone? He didn’t want to. He didn’t want to spend the rest of his life like this, just waiting for the day he finally died.

He wished Hannibal had killed him when he’d confronted him instead of leaving him alone. He wished Hannibal had killed him that night in his kitchen all those years ago, before he’d ever had the chance to fall in love with him. It would have been kinder if he had.

But, then again...kindness had never been Hannibal’s strong suit.

And, apparently, self-respect had never been Will’s.

Without really thinking about what he was doing, Will grabbed his phone and opened his contacts list. There were only four names there, listed alphabetically: Chiyoh, Hannibal, Nadine, and Ronny. Will had tried to make himself delete Hannibal's number the day after he left, but he couldn't bring himself to do it - it felt too permanent, like deleting it would finally make it real.

And besides, Will had it memorized. So there was really no point in erasing it anyway.

His thumb hovered over Hannibal's name for a moment, debating whether or not to call him. Just to see if he would even answer. He wasn't sure he would. He wasn't sure what he would say if he did. But rather than press Hannibal's name and find out, Will jerked his thumb up and called Chiyoh. Something had occurred to him a few days ago, and he wanted to see if he was right. He brought the phone up to his ear, listening to the ringback tone.

"What, Will?"

Will blinked. He was surprised she had answered him.

"Chiyoh?"

She huffed at him. "What is it, Will?" She asked again, just as impatiently as before. "What do you want?"

"Um." He had been away from her for so long that he had almost forgotten how direct, how blunt, she could be. "I, uh, I was wondering if Hannibal was with you."

"...Why?" She sounded suspicious.

"Well, um, I don't know if he told you, or if you even care," Will said uncomfortably. "But, we, um, we had a fight a few days ago. Hannibal left."

“I heard.”

“Hannibal told you?”

“Yes.”

He could tell she was getting more and more annoyed with him. It would probably be best if he got to the point, and quick. “Is Hannibal staying with you?”

“I don’t see how that’s any of your business. The two of you broke up.”

“Well, can you at least tell me if he’s with you right now?”

“Hannibal’s not with me right now, no.”

Will narrowed his eyes. He had figured out her game by now. “Have you seen him at all today?”

“No.”

“Are you planning on seeing him at some point today?”

“I’m not Hannibal’s keeper, Will.” She reminded him. “I don’t know what he’s doing or where’s going.”

Will sighed. He should have known better than to expect a real answer from her. “Okay. Nevermind. I’m sorry I bothered you. Just…could you please not tell Hannibal I called?”

“Why would I tell Hannibal *you* called?” She asked him coldly.

“I don’t know. Just…just forget this ever happened.”

“Oh, I will.” She promised him before hanging up.

Will pulled the phone away from his ear and dropped it back on the bed. He wished he had never called her at all.

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“Come on, kid. Snap out of it.” Ronny hissed at him.

“Hmm?” Will hummed, turning to look at him over his shoulder.

“What are you doing? Hank asked you for a beer over half an hour ago.”

Will winced. “Sorry. I forgot.”

“You forgot?! How could you forget? There’s only eight people in the bar - including you and me!”

“I said I was sorry.” Will snapped, yanking the mini fridge open and grabbing a bottle of Coors from inside. “Here, I’ll just-”

“No, he wanted Miller.” Ronny said, snatching the beer from him. “What is *with* you, Will? You’ve been makin’ mistakes all night!”

“You really want to know?” Will growled, glaring at him.

“What do I look like? The host of ‘Feelings Hour’”?” Ronny sneered, handing him Hank’s beer. “Look, I know you’re havin’ a hard time losin’ your boyfriend and all-”

“I am *not* having a hard time.” Will snarled. “I’m fine.”

“‘Coulda fooled me.” Ronny shot back. He glared at Will, looked him up and down. “Maybe Nadine’s right.” He muttered. “Maybe I should give ya some time off.”

“No, don’t!” Will begged him, horrified at the thought of spending his days alone in that house, with nothing to do but think about Hannibal and the fact that he was no longer a part of his life anymore. “Nadine doesn’t know what she’s talking about.”

“Pretty sure she does, kid.” Ronny said sternly, but his expression softened. “She’s just lookin’ out for ya. She knows what you’re going through, ya know.”

Will hung his head. “Yeah, I know.”

“Look, if ya need to take a few days off, ya can have them. But if ya wanna work, I need ya to work, Will.”

Will nodded. “I’m sorry.”

“Nothin’ to be sorry for.” Ronny shifted uncomfortably on his feet. “May be hard right now, kid, but it’ll get better. You’ll find someone else, don’t worry.”

Will bit his lip and abruptly turned away.

No he wouldn’t.

He would never find anyone to replace Hannibal.

There was no one like him. Not even close.

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Will walked slowly along the edge of the lake, staring out across the flat, gray surface, his thoughts whirling.

Ronny had mentioned last night that his physical therapy was going better than expected. That he might be able to remove the sling sooner than his surgeon had anticipated. Will had smiled and told him that was great, congratulated him, but inside, he had been panicking.

Because Ronny had been working at the bar for a couple of weeks now, staying right up until closing and leaving most of the more physical aspects of the job to Will...but he had just thought it was because Ronny loved his bar and missed it. He hadn’t even considered the fact that Ronny was showing up simply because he *could* . The thought that Ronny might not need him anymore, that he might be out of a job and a reason to stay even sooner than he’d predicted, was worrisome at the least and painful at the most.

Because once Ronny was cleared to work again, when he had no reason to keep him around, just what was Will supposed to do then? He couldn’t stay in New Orleans - didn’t *want* to stay in New Orleans - but he couldn’t bear the thought of starting over again someplace else, alone, without Hannibal, but knowing he was still out there somewhere, away from him. And he knew his life would be either torturously long or tragically short, but it didn’t matter either way if it was a life without Hannibal in it.

‘What is the *matter* with you?’ Will chided himself, kicking a rock into the lake. ‘He has hurt you more than anyone else you’ve ever known. He’s lied to you more times than you can keep track of. Is that *really* the kind of life you want to have?’

‘But it wasn’t always out of malice.’ He argued. ‘Sometimes he only did it because he was trying to help me-‘’

‘Are you listening to yourself?! It doesn’t matter! Hannibal will never change! Do you understand?! Never! He will always lie to you. He will always manipulate you! And even if he doesn’t mean it, he will always, *always* hurt you. Is that what you want? To spend the rest of your life always wondering what game he’s playing? Having to constantly question everything? Never knowing for sure whether he’s lying to you or not?!’

No, it wasn’t.

But he didn’t want to be alone. He had been alone his entire life before he had met Hannibal. He had always felt like an outsider to humanity, had always been the freak. Even his own father, as much as he had loved him, had never understood him. Not like Hannibal did.

Will closed his eyes. No, he didn’t want to be alone. He couldn’t do it. Not again.

And then something squelched loudly, wetly, underfoot, and Will stumbled, eyes snapping open as he steadied himself. He lifted his foot, and found a mass of rotting pulp, some unidentifiable fruit, and fat, wiggling maggots, underneath.

Will stepped back, disgusted. Where had that come from? There were no fruit trees anywhere nearby. And they had never come out here to eat, so where…

And then Will remembered. Remembered walking across the fields with Hannibal trailing unhappily behind him, tossing pears for the deer.

Will frowned. Now that he thought about it, he hadn’t seen the deer in a while. But he had thrown the pears in January. Surely, that was more than enough time for the deer to have found them. So why hadn’t it…

Something cold washed over Will then.

He thought about the little deer. Its crown of antlers that refused to fall despite the fact that it shouldn't have them this time of year. The dark coat, the unnerving eyes, its strange tendency to appear and disappear without any warning. Its call that Hannibal had said he couldn't hear but Will had heard so many times...

It wasn't real, he realized. It never was. It was never there. It had been a ghost, a hallucination, a figment of his overactive imagination. It was like Beverly, and Abigail, and, and... *her* .

Will bit his lip, swallowing the scream that was building in his throat.

Was there *anything* in his life that was real?

Will stepped out onto the porch and shut the door behind him. He fumbled a bit with his keys before he managed to slip them in the lock.

It was as he was turning around, getting ready to climb down the porch steps, when Will heard the sound of a gunning car engine. He looked up in time to see an expensive, gray Mercedes with darkly tinted windows speed away and out of sight. Will stared after it, uneasy.

Though, admittedly, he hadn't gotten a very good look at it, he knew, in ways he couldn't explain, or understand, or even prove, that it was the same car he'd seen idling in the bar's parking lot the other night. He knew it.

But if it was the same car...then that meant whoever was inside was following him. And that was just ridiculous. Wasn't it? Who on earth could possibly be following him?

‘Hannibal.’ His brain supplied instantly. ‘It has to be Hannibal. Who else would it be?’

Yes, it had to be Hannibal. It made sense. Will wondered what he wanted. Was he just following Will around, seeing what he was doing day after day? He already knew Will’s schedule - what else could he possibly have to learn?

‘Maybe he’s just waiting for an in.’ Will thought as he climbed into his truck. ‘Waiting for the right moment when he knows you’re weak and vulnerable to come and ask you to take you back.’

It did sound like something Hannibal would do…

So what was he waiting for? Couldn’t he tell just how miserable Will was without him?

Just how much worse did he think Will could get?

Nadine was busy mopping the floor over by the coffee machine when Will walked in.

“Hey, honey!” She called to him cheerfully. “Be wit’cha in just a minute!”

“You need some help with that?” Will offered, hovering awkwardly by the door.

“Oh, no, that’s alright.” She said, beaming at him. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Okay.” Will answered before moving hesitantly over to the rows of food on the other side of the store. He meandered down the aisles, plucking things at random - a bag of pretzels, a

couple cans of tuna, sandwich bread and a jar of peanut butter. By the time he came back to the checkout desk, Nadine had finished.

"You need gas, Will?" She asked as she squeezed herself behind the counter.

"Yes please." He said, laying the food in front of her. "And this too."

Nadine's dark eyes flickered over the pile and then back to him. "This your dinner?" She asked with distinct disapproval.

"No."

It wasn't. It was his food for the week. But Will had a feeling if he told Nadine that, she wouldn't be happy.

"Mmm-hmm." She hummed, giving him a look that clearly said she didn't believe him as she bagged it up. Will tried not to squirm under her searching gaze. "You eatin' okay, baby?"

"Yep."

It bothered him that he wasn't bothered by the fact that he lied to her so easily, without hesitation. Didn't he care that he was hurting her? She had been good to him. The least he owed her was the truth.

'Hannibal's rubbing off on you.' Will thought with disgust. 'He had no problem lying to the people he loved either.'

"You don't look it." Nadine said then, dragging Will forcefully out of his own head and back into reality. "No offense, honey, but you could do with some meat on your bones."

“I’m fine, Nadine. Really.”

“Ya sure? I could make you something if you’d like. I’m a good cook, I swear - even Ronny likes my food and he’s about as picky as a three-year-old. What do ya say, hon?”

“No.” Will said firmly. “You’ve done more than enough for me. I owe you too much already.”

Nadine snorted. “Ya don't owe me nothin’ Will. I ain’t nice to ya ‘cause I’m expectin’ something in return. I’m nice to ya ‘cause I’ve known sufferin’ and I don’t like seein’ other people go through it.”

Will suddenly found himself embarrassingly close to tears. “Please don’t.” He begged her quietly. “Please stop being so nice to me. I don’t deserve it.”

“Honey-” Nadine began, clicking her tongue sympathetically.

“No, stop it. Don’t tell me I do ‘cause I don’t. I’m...I’m not a good person, Nadine. I’ve done...a lot of really bad things in my life. And if you knew about even half of them you would never want to see me again. Okay? Maybe I don’t deserve good things and nice people. Did you ever think of that? Maybe I’m supposed to be sad and miserable. So why can’t you just let me have it? Why can’t you just leave me alone?!”

Nadine didn’t answer him. She studied him for a long moment, her face betraying nothing. Will was ashamed of himself. If he hadn’t deserved her kindness before, he certainly didn’t deserve it now. He gulped a few deep breaths and waited for Nadine to tell him to leave and never come back.

Instead, she reached out and gently took his hand. “It ain’t human to be purely evil, Will.” She told him quietly. “Just like it ain’t human to be sinless, either.” She squeezed him. “It’s not my place to judge anybody. The Bible says I’m supposed to love so that’s what I’m gonna do. I’m gonna love as much as I can while I’m here even if nobody wants it.”

She smiled at him then, and Will swallowed around the lump in his throat. “Why?” He croaked, staring at her. “What’s the point?”

She shrugged. “‘Cause life’s way too short and painful to do anythin’ else.” She said. “And besides - it’s those who are hardest to love who need love the most.” She raised their conjoined hands to her lips and kissed his knuckles. “I know you’re hurtin’ now, Will.” She told him. “I know it hurts so much you feel like you might die if you have to go another minute without him. But I promise you, *I promise you* , it’ll get better. You’re gonna be okay. You hear me?”

Will nodded, not trusting himself to speak. Nadine patted his hands one more time before she released them.

“Take care of yourself, boy.” She said. “I’m gonna be callin’ Ronny to ask how you’re doin’ and if he tells me anything I don’t like, then you’re not gonna like me very much. I can promise you that.”

“No, please don’t.” Will begged her.

“I will.” She told him cheerfully. “And besides, I need to yell at him to give me my casserole dish back - there’s this poor, unhappy boy who needs it more than he does.”

Will heaved a sigh but knew there was no point in protesting. Rather than even try, he simply said, “Thanks, Nadine.”

“No need to thank me, honey.” She said with a warm smile that split her round, pretty face. “Ain’t no trouble helping you out - I’m always happy to.”

It was crowded that night, significantly more so than usual. The entire bar filled with dozens of grinning faces, all bathed in a soft, warm light, and the air was heavy with happy,

meaningless chatter and easy laughter.

Behind the bar, Will blinked slowly, staring straight ahead at nothing at all, and tried to tune out the symphony of voices that surrounded him. He could feel the excitement that was in the air - it tugged insistently at him, urging him to don the emotion for himself, but Will stubbornly ignored it. He didn't want to be happy. He was miserable and he wanted to keep being miserable. How was he supposed to be anything else when he was so completely alone, so hopelessly separated from normal, happy people?

Across the room, Ronny was busy regaling a group of listeners with a story of some sort. It must have been funny - people were roaring with laughter, choking and snorting on their beer as Ronny spoke, waving his one arm enthusiastically about. Will watched him and was never more aware of how much he didn't belong than in that moment.

"Hey, Will!" Travis called, yanking Will back down to earth. "Get me another beer, would ya?"

Will drifted vaguely to the mini fridge and pulled out a Corona. Once he pried the bottle cap off, he slipped a lime wedge in the opening and silently passed it over.

"Thanks, man!"

"Sure." Will muttered before he turned his attention back to the crowd.

It had been almost a week since he and Hannibal had said goodbye. And in another three weeks, he would be saying goodbye to Ronny and his bar, too. The time between the thens and now somehow felt both incredibly short and painfully far away. Will wasn't sure what he was going to do when Ronny finally dismissed him. He had tried to leave New Orleans once before and he hadn't been able to.

He doubted he'd have much success this time around either.

He heaved a sigh. In front of him, Jenny May frowned.

“Hey.” She said. “Why the long face? You look like you just lost your best friend.”

‘That’s because I have.’ Will thought, but he forced himself to smile at her.

“Pretty sure that’s my line.” He joked weakly. “Only the bartender’s allowed to ask that.”

Jenny May snorted. “Oh yeah? Well, then do me a favor and tell that to Ronny ‘cause I don’t think he’s ever once asked anyone that. Closest he’s ever come was threatening to kick Earl Armstrong out if he didn’t stop whining about losing some basketball game. Best Easter ever.”

Will snorted despite himself. “I’ll see what I can do.” He told her. “But if I tell Ronny how to run things, he’ll probably throw me out too.”

“He wouldn’t dare.” Jenny May said with a teasing grin. “If I have to trade your pretty face for his old mug, I might have to find a new bar.”

Will chuckled awkwardly, not quite sure what to say to that. “You want another drink?” He blurted, figuring it was the safest thing to say.

“Honey, I thought you’d never ask.” She answered, beaming as she handed him her empty glass.

Will refilled the drink and handed it back to her. And as soon as he had, a hand settled heavily on his shoulder. Will jumped, and when he looked around, he found himself face to face with Ronny.

“Stop giving her drinks, kid.” Ronny whispered. “Unless you *like* being sexual harassed?”

“I think I’m so used to it by now I don’t even notice it.”

It was true - between Jenny May’s hints, Hannibal’s shameless, near-constant flirting, and years of psychologists fawning over him, Will had grown pretty immune to flattery.

“Great, that’s just what I need - a lawsuit.”

“Don’t worry about it, Ronny.” Will yawned, leaning against the back wall of the bar. “I’m not offended.”

“Yeah, well.” Ronny shrugged. “If ya ever do get tired of it, probably the best thing ya can do is just tell her ya don’t swing that way.”

Will winced at that. Because honestly, he didn’t know which way he swung, or if he even swung any way at all. He had always chased girls, but not because he had any real interest in them. He went for girls because he was supposed to, the way you were supposed to taste oak and hints of cherry if someone handed you a glass of expensive wine and told you to sip. You would say you could taste it (even if you couldn’t) and maybe you could convince yourself you could, but the reality was you were just fooling yourself. And as for men, Will had never had much interest in them either.

It seemed the only person he had ever really liked was Hannibal.

“I’ll try to remember that.” Will told Ronny listlessly.

“Just whatever ya do, don’t tell her you’re single. ‘Cause then she’ll never leave ya alone. Gay or otherwise.”

Single.

It hurt, hearing it said out loud, and so casually at that. More than he cared to admit. It made Will realize just how much he had liked the idea of belonging to somebody, and of having someone belong to him.

Now he belonged to no one.

It must have shown on his face, because Ronny frowned at him then. “Christ, kid. Nadine made it sound like this boyfriend of yours was the Devil. And you act like this asshole was your freaking savior.”

“What’s your point, Ronny?” Will grumbled. He wasn’t in the mood to explain himself to anybody. Least of all Ronny.

“I just can’t figure it out. You’re the one who broke up with him, aren't cha? I mean, did ya love the guy or not?”

Will glared down at his feet. “He didn’t love me. I thought he did, but he didn’t.”

“Then what’s the problem? You really wanna be with someone who don’t love ya back? Someone who don’t treat ya right?”

“Obviously not.” Will snapped. “It’s just…hard.”

“‘Hard’?” Ronny echoed incredulously. “Kid, you’re *free* ! You can do whatever ya want with whoever ya want! You don’t owe nobody nothing! The world is your oyster - live it up!”

“Yeah thanks, Ronny. I’ll get right on that.” Will said, rolling his eyes.

“I’m tellin’ ya, kid. You’re looking at this all wrong.” Ronny said, clapping him again on the shoulders.

“Hmm.” Will hummed, and, desperate to change the subject, he then asked Ronny something he had been meaning to bring up for a few days now. “Hey. Random question, but, uh…have you noticed anything strange around here lately?”

“‘Sides you mopin’ around? No, not really.”

“I’m serious.” Will insisted. “Have you seen anyone you didn’t recognize? Do you know if anyone got a new car recently?”

“A new car?” Ronny repeated slowly. “Not that I know of. Why?”

Will shrugged. “It’s probably nothing.” He told him. “I’ve just seen this gray car hanging around here a couple times. I thought it was kind of weird.”

Ronny seemed to be considering this. “Expensive car?” He asked after a moment. “Dark tinted windows? Out-of-state plates?”

“I didn’t get a look at the plates.” Will said quickly, his pulse quickening. “But yeah, that’s basically it.”

“Oh, yeah, I know that car.” Ronny said gravely.

“Really?” Will asked him. “Who is it?”

“Ain’t it obvious? It’s the IRS, kid.”

Will was so taken aback, so caught off guard, that for a second, he couldn’t speak.

“The...the *what* ?”

“Yeah, same thing happened to my buddy Lester back in ‘06.” Ronny told him, shaking his head. “Soon as his business started doing well, the feds slapped him with an audit. Followed him around for weeks.”

There was so much to unpack there that Will honestly didn’t know where to start. “Did your friend,” He asked slowly, confused, “Not pay his taxes?”

“‘Course he paid his taxes. But even if he didn’t, so what? That’s not the point.”

“What *is* the point?”

“Point is the system’s rigged, kid. Don’t you know that? Government ain’t set up so a man can be successful. It’s set up to milk us for all we’re worth and it will use whatever it can to make a quick buck off the backs of hard-working men.”

“...I’m sorry. I’m still stuck on the fact that you think you’re doing well.”

“The hell’s that supposed to mean? I’ll have you know I’m doing very well for myself, boy.”

“Ronny, I’ve seen your books.” Will reminded him flatly, rolling his eyes. “No offense, but I’m shocked you can actually afford to keep the lights on in this place.”

“Hey, it’s always slow in the winter. Things’ll pick up again once it starts gettin’ hot out, you’ll see.”

“Whatever, Ronny.” Will said, shaking his head and looking out across the bar again.

“Hey. First rule of being a good American: don’t ever trust our government. Okay, kid?”

“Believe me, I don’t.” Will grumbled, thinking of Jack and fast he’d throw Will to the wolves if he ever found him again. He wondered idly what Ronny would say if he ever found out Will had once been the FBI’s most prized agent and was now one of their most wanted men.

“Good. And listen: if ya see that car again, ya let me know, alright?”

“Yep.”

It was a lie. Will had absolutely no intention of ever letting Ronny know if he saw that car again.

It didn’t seem worth the lecture or the headache that was sure to follow.

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Will shifted from one foot to the other, clutching the bouquet of flowers to his chest and eyeing the enormous, wrought iron gate before him nervously.

‘Come on.’ He urged himself, annoyed with his fluttering heart, the ball of anxiety that had settled in his stomach like a stone. ‘Just go in, already. What do you think’s gonna happen?’

Nothing. Nothing was going to happen. That was the problem. Because a part of Will wished that something would.

But of course, nothing was going to happen. He knew that.

With a sigh, Will slipped past the gate and followed the paved path forward.

He hadn’t been there in years. He didn’t remember it nearly as well as he thought he did. Twice he had to turn around and start over, wandering through the maze of concrete and stone before he found the right one. He swallowed when he saw the simple marker, the name carved there.

John Graham

For a minute Will just stood there, not sure what to do, not sure what to say, and then he remembered the bouquet and quickly laid it in front of the grave.

“H-hey, Daddy.” He mumbled. “It’s me.”

He paused, as though waiting for an answer that he knew would never come. He looked at the worn stone, at the chips that had collected around the edges, the bits of grass and debris caught in the letters, the bird droppings that decorated the surface, and suddenly felt guilty.

“I’m sorry I haven’t been back in so long.” Will said, quickly reaching down and plucking a weed that had sprouted through a crack at the base of the stone. “I should have come and seen you sooner. I guess I haven't really been the best son to you, have I?”

No answer. Will sighed.

‘This is stupid.’ He thought. ‘You’re talking to a rock and a pile of bones underneath. This isn’t your daddy. You’re just wasting your time.’

And in truth, that was why Will had avoided visiting his father for so long. Because he found no comfort in it. His daddy was dead, far beyond Will’s reach now. He couldn’t talk to him, couldn’t touch him. There was no point coming here.

But still. This was what you were supposed to do. Be a dutiful child and visit your father's grave every once in a while. Leave flowers and clean it off and be devastated that he was gone. And Will had spent his whole life trying to do what normal, good people were supposed to do.

He shifted awkwardly again.

"Look, um," He said, feeling incredibly foolish as he addressed his shoes. "The reason I came today was to say goodbye. I'm gonna be leaving New Orleans in a few weeks. I don't know where I'm going, but I don't think I'm coming back. I don't think I can. I just...I just felt like I should see you one last time before I go."

The wind blew gently then, stirring the flower petals in their plastic wrapping. They were white daisies. Will had picked them up at a small florist shop in town. He had been uncomfortable when he'd ducked inside and frustrated when he saw the wall of red roses and pink carnations, the elegant orchids and bright tulips. None of them seemed right for what he had in mind - they were romantic flowers, the kind you bought for a date or anniversary. Not the sort of thing used to apologize to your dead father for being such an unforgivable failure. Standing there amidst the sea of color, Will had almost wished Hannibal would appear beside him. He wouldn't have been surprised if he had - he saw the gray Mercedes almost everywhere he went now. And if Hannibal had been there, he would have known exactly which flowers to get. He would have insisted on the most beautiful and expensive bouquet in the shop, all the while explaining the secret language of flowers to Will.

But he hadn't shown up. And Will had chosen a sad, cheap little bundle of white daisies because they seemed the most innocent choice from among the rest. Now that it was against his father's grave, it seemed even more pathetic than when Will had first picked them up.

Will heaved another sigh. He hadn't come here to sulk and feel sorry for himself. He had come to try and make things right. So that he wouldn't have any regrets later.

"I'm sorry." He said. "For everything. I know your life was hard and I made it harder. I'm sorry I wasn't...I wasn't something else. That I wasn't normal. Believe me, Daddy, I tried to be. I tried so hard for so long. But I...I'm tired of trying."

He hung his head, ashamed to admit it out loud when his father had always been so strong, had spent his whole life fighting heartache and misery without complaint. For Will's sake.

"I'm sorry I couldn't be good." Will whispered. "I wanted to be. For you. For me. But I...I'm just not. And I can't pretend like I am anymore."

Biting his lip, Will raised his head at last and forced himself to look at the grave, his father's name.

There was no marker for his mother. His daddy had insisted there wouldn't be until they found her body. Will had spent years trying to persuade him otherwise, arguing that she couldn't possibly still be alive, but his father had not budged. And when he died, Will had decided to honor his father's wishes and kept her name off the stone.

But he had been sure to leave enough room for it. In case she ever was found someday.

"Bye, Daddy." Will said quietly. "I miss you."

The only answer he got was another gentle breeze that ruffled his hair.

Will lay curled on his side on Hannibal's bed. The silence was incredibly loud as it pressed against him from all sides, impossible to ignore. Will sighed, relishing the sound for the sake of sound, and wondered if he would feel even better if he screamed. But then he worried that if he did, if he started screaming, then he wouldn't be able to stop.

He shifted slightly, nosing at Hannibal's pillow, inhaling his scent. It was almost completely gone now. In a few more days, Will probably wouldn't be able to smell him at all. What was he supposed to do once it was finally gone?

He rolled from one side to the other on the luxuriously soft mattress. The silence, the darkness, Hannibal's absence...he was all too aware of it all. He wished it didn't bother him as much as it did. That he didn't need Hannibal as much as he did.

Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same…

Will wondered what his life would have been like if he had never met Hannibal. Where he would be now. Probably dead or locked up in an asylum, if he was being honest with himself.

Were either of those options really worse than where he was now? If he was dead or insane, at least he would be spared the agony of awareness, the pain he was in now. Ignorance was bliss, so they said.

Will felt the increasingly familiar sting of gathering tears at the thought.

He wished he was normal. That he had the normal, acceptable amount of empathy everyone was expected to have. He wished his daddy was still alive, that he could talk to him one last time. That he had followed in his father's footsteps and become a mechanic, a blue-collar, working class nobody. He wished he had never joined the FBI. He wished that he had never met Hannibal Lecter.

But most of all, he wished he had been stronger than he had been. That he had fought him harder, resisted him more. That he had never fallen in love with him.

If he hadn't, he would never know just how much, how deep, he could feel.

But at least he wouldn't hurt so much.

Will closed his eyes.

I cannot live without my life...I cannot live without my soul…

_____

The bar was quiet, empty for the night. Under the gentle glow of the one light Will had left on, he could almost convince himself that Ronny's shabby little dive was cozy, even charming. Looking around, Will was surprised to realize he was going to miss it when he finally left.

Slipping into the storeroom, Will double checked that the back door was locked and rinsed the glasses that were in the sink. He went slowly, carefully, dragging the chore out as long as he possibly could before he had finally cleaned the last one and set it in the rack to dry overnight.

He had already wiped down the counter twice but he wiped it down again for good measure, scrubbing at imaginary dust and grime. He made sure that everything was back in place, that there was nothing out of order, and then walked like a man sentenced to death across the bar to the front door.

He had already turned off the little neon 'OPEN' sign. The only thing he had left to do was turn off the last light and lock the front door behind him on his way out.

Will's fingers brushed the light switch, but he couldn't bring himself to flick it down. He stared out at the darkness that was waiting for him just beyond the glass panel of the door, and felt something inside him recoil sharply at the sight.

It would be hours before dawn. Hours that he would spend alone in the dark quiet of his empty house, with nothing but his own miserable thoughts to keep him company. He sighed. He didn't want to go back. He didn't want to spend another night by himself. Without Hannibal.

He lowered his hand from the switch and slowly stepped back from the door. He didn't have to leave just yet. Ronny had never told him he couldn't stay after closing. And who would

mind if Will just sat around in the little bar by himself for a bit? No one. There wasn't anyone who would care.

Will wandered back behind the bar and took down a bottle of whiskey. He poured himself a finger and knocked it back, gritting his teeth against the burn. He poured himself another. He'd have to remember to tell Ronny to dock him a few dollars on his next paycheck. He savored this one, sipping it slowly until his fingers were warm and there was nothing left for him to drink. He checked his watch and sighed again. He'd killed five minutes. If that.

Will put the bottle back on the shelf and carried the empty glass to the back room to rinse it out, feeling as if he were floating there rather than walking. By the time he'd washed the glass and put it beside the others to dry, Will was feeling absolutely miserable. He didn't want to leave. He didn't want to leave just yet. But he really didn't have a reason to stay either. He looked around the tiny storeroom, for something to convince he could use as an excuse, and noticed an old landline telephone on the wall, tucked discreetly in the corner. Will blinked, frowned. How had he never noticed it before? And then, because he was truly desperate for something to do, he reached out and carefully lifted the phone from its cradle, twirling the cord around his fingers as he brought it to his ear. He was surprised to hear a dial tone. He couldn't believe it worked. Did Ronny actually use this thing?

Curious, Will punched his cellphone number in the keypad and chuckled when his phone buzzed in his pocket a few seconds later. Grinning, he pressed the switch hook and ended the call. He hadn't seen a phone like this in years. Was it sad that he had actually gotten a kick out of using one?

Will was just about to put the phone back when a stupid thought occurred to him, a truly horrible idea. He blamed the alcohol for making him think it was a good one.

He slowly brought the phone back to his ear. With shaking fingers, he dialed the one number he had memorized, one of only four he had in his contacts list now.

When it began to ring, Will clenched the plastic phone so hard he could hear it creaking in his hand.

A moment passed.

He was shaking.

Another.

“Hello?”

Will was so shocked to hear Hannibal’s voice, so shocked that he had actually picked up, that he nearly dropped the phone.

“Hello?” Hannibal asked again. Despite the hour, he didn’t sound the least bit irritated, or concerned, or wary. Will had to bite his lip to keep from gasping, but he managed to stay quiet, clinging to the phone like a lifeline, listening to Hannibal’s soft breathing.

“...Will?” Hannibal then said next, so gently, so lovingly, that it hurt, and Will yanked the phone away from his ear as if he had been burned. He slammed it back onto the cradle.

For a moment, Will could only stand there panting, his chest heaving as if he had just run a mile, his hand holding the phone in place as he stared at it with horror.

Oh God. What had he done ? What had he just done?! What had he been thinking?!

He hadn’t been. He hadn’t been thinking. And look what it fucking got him.

He had known better. He had known what chasing Hannibal would mean, what it would do to him. He’d told himself he wouldn’t, no matter how badly he wanted to. He had promised himself that he would stay strong. That he would choose himself this time. That he would protect himself from the temptation of taking Hannibal back, the pain of taking him back.

And God, it hurt. Hearing his voice again, hearing him say his name so tenderly, knowing he wasn't waiting for Will at the house, of not knowing where he was and if he would ever see him again, had hurt even more than Will had thought possible.

Will felt something splinter, crack, inside him at the thought, and a moment later, he was sobbing.

He slowly sank to the storeroom floor, arms wrapped protectively around his middle as he cried, trying to hold himself together.

He wouldn't call Hannibal again. He wouldn't do that to himself. He couldn't. It hurt too much. It hurt so much he felt as though he couldn't breathe...

But…

Maybe Hannibal would call *him* .

Will sniffed, thinking.

Hannibal had Will's cell phone number. And if he was really convinced it was Will who had called him just then, he could always call that number back.

He would. Will was sure he would. He wouldn't be able to let Will go. He loved him. Loved him obsessively. He'd call back. Any moment now, the phone would ring.

Will sucked in a few shaky breaths.

No. He wouldn't call Hannibal.

...But if Hannibal called back, he'd picked up. He'd at least hear what he had to say.

With a small nod, Will settled himself against the wall.

He waited.

He didn't remember falling asleep.

Chapter End Notes

Alright gang, here's the deal:

We're down to the last couple of chapters of this story. At this point, I'm planning for three more chapters and an epilogue, but I may be splitting one of those chapters in two depending on how long it gets.

To be honest, I am completely burnt out with writing this (these past 3 chapters were especially hard) and I'm really nervous about writing the end - I really want to do a good job but what I'm planning to do is NOT my forte. So, I'm going to be taking a little time off for the next couple weeks to sit down and plan what I want to do. I'm not sure when the next chapter will be posted, but I think 3-4 weeks is a safe bet.

As always, thanks for reading, and I hope you enjoyed it!

Truth Is That I Never Learn

Chapter Summary

Surprise, surprise - Hannibal's actions have consequences.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"...Oh, my God! Will?! Will, wake up! Will!"

"W-what? What?"

There were hands on his shoulders, shaking him roughly. The lights overhead were painfully bright. Ronny was crouched in front of him, his broad, worried face only about a foot away from his. Will struggled to sit up.

"What happened?" Ronny demanded. "Are you hurt? Did you hit your head?"

"What?" Will was still half-asleep. He rubbed his eyes, trying to wake up. Ronny's patience with him was apparently wearing thin.

"For Christ's sake. ARE. YOU. ALRIGHT?" He enunciated loudly, grabbing Will's shoulders and shaking him once more.

"Yes." Will huffed at him, pulling himself free. "Why are you…"

He trailed off as the night before came trickling back to him, as he realized where he was, how it looked. He glanced nervously over at Ronny, who glared back.

"You wanna explain to me what the hell's going on?" He asked, and Will winced. He could easily imagine what Ronny must have thought when he'd walked in and found Will slumped in the corner of the room, how terrified he must have been. But now that Will was awake and talking and more-or-less coherent, now that he had no reason to be afraid, the gentler edge of his worry had worn off, leaving burning anger in its wake. "Have you been drinking?!"

"No. Well. Yes." Will told him. "I had a few fingers of whiskey while I was closing down the bar last night but-"

"A few fingers?" Ronny echoed disbelievingly.

"Yes." Will insisted. "I wasn't drunk, I was...I was waiting for a call."

Ronny was silent for a few moments, eyeing Will narrowly. "A call from your boyfriend?"

"No." Will lied. The last thing he wanted was to admit out loud to anybody that he had spent all night waiting for a phone call from Hannibal that he clearly never bothered to even make.

"Hmm." Was all Ronny said to that. And then, "You been here all night?"

"I guess." Will mumbled, looking away. "But, look, I really didn't mean to, I just…" He gestured helplessly to the sack of lemons he had been using as a pillow. "I haven't been sleeping well since...." He swallowed, hanging his head. "I must have been more tired than I realized."

Ronny considered him for a moment. It was impossible to read his expression, to tell what he was thinking, even for Will.

“You’re lucky then, that you fell asleep here and not at the wheel of your car.” He said eventually, softening slightly. “Especially considerin’ the state it’s in.”

Will looked over at him sharply. “What do you mean?”

Ronny raised an eyebrow at him and hauled himself to his feet. Will scrambled after him as he shuffled to the back door and pushed it open.

“Must’a ran over a nail or piece a glass on your way over here yesterday.” Ronny called over his shoulder as he led Will across the lot. “It’s definitely a slow leak.”

Will came to an abrupt halt when he saw his lopsided truck and bit back a groan. Instead, he stood with Ronny and stared silently at the single deflated tire sagging heavily under the weight of the car.

“You got a spare?” Ronny asked him after a minute.

“No.”

“Course you don’t.” Ronny muttered. “You’re gonna have to call a tow truck.”

“Yeah, I know.” Will sighed as he pulled his cell phone from his pocket and began to scroll through his ‘Recents’ call list. “Any chance you could give me a ride to pick it up later?” He asked once he found the number for the tow service he had used only a few weeks prior.

“Why? They’re not gonna be open by the time I shut down.” Ronny frowned. “Just ride in the tow truck and wait for it at the shop.”

“Are you sure? It could take hours before they’re done.” Will reminded him, raising his phone to his ear and waiting for the ringback tone. “I might not be back for a while and I don’t want to miss any more work-”

“‘Miss work’?” Ronny repeated, his bushy eyebrows shooting halfway up his forehead. “Son, what the hell ‘work’ you think you’re gonna be missin’?!”

Will fumbled, horrified. “W-What do you mean?”

Ronny huffed. “Come on, Will. You don’t really expect me to let you work after I found you passed out in the storeroom, do ya?”

Will had just opened his mouth to protest when the tow service’s receptionist finally picked up.

“Hello?” She was just as loud this time as she was the last time, smacking her gum obnoxiously around the word. Will remembered now why Hannibal hadn’t liked her.

“Uh, hi.” Will said, turning away from Ronny and trying desperately to ignore the anxiety that was building in his chest. “I’ve, um, I’ve got a flat tire and no spare and I was wondering if someone could-”

“What’s the address?” She asked before he could finish. She sounded bored. Will quickly rattled it off. When he hung up a few moments later, he couldn’t bring himself to look Ronny in the eye.

“They’re coming in an hour.” He explained to the pavement, his shoes. “Is it alright if I wait inside the bar until they come?”

“Course.” Ronny told him, as if it was obvious. “Why wouldn’t it be?”

“I just thought...if you’re gonna fire me, you wouldn’t want me around-”

“‘Fire’ you? Who said anything about firing you?”

Will glanced up at Ronny, puzzled. “You just said you weren’t gonna let me work.”

“Yeah, kid. For the day.” Ronny said, rolling his eyes. “Not permanently.”

“But...What…?”

“Call it a ‘sick day’ or ‘paid time off’, whatever makes ya feel better.” Ronny shook his head. “Christ, kid, I know I'm not exactly Mr. Rogers, but I ain’t completely heartless. I’d never kick a man while he’s down.”

Will stared at him, hardly daring to believe what he was hearing. His throat felt tight as he whispered. “Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it.” Ronny said, looking uncomfortable. He shuffled a bit. “Right. No use standin’ around in this heat. Might as well wait inside. Come on, kid.”

It wasn’t until a few hours later, when Will’s truck had been towed to the garage and the mechanic finally got around to changing the tire, that it was discovered his car wouldn't start. It would take another hour to figure out why - every appointment slot was filled and the shop was busy. By the time the mechanic managed to take a look at Will’s truck, the sun was beginning to set and the shop was getting ready to close.

“It’s an easy fix.” He assured Will, popping the hood and gesturing to an empty socket. “Your spark plug’s gone.”

Will could tell he was watching him from the corner of his eye, that he remembered him from the last time he was there. “Gone?” He asked, keeping his tone light.

“Yeah. Gone.” The mechanic repeated, closing the hood and dusting his oil-stained hands. He snuck another look at Will before he continued, “Look, I’m sure you already know this, but uh…spark plugs don’t just fall out. You know what I mean? It’s a bit of a process, getting them out.” He paused, letting Will absorb that bit of information. “You get what I’m saying, right?”

“Yeah, I get it.” Will told him. “Can you replace it?”

“I can. But, unfortunately, I don’t have any spares right now. I’m gonna have to pick one up for you on my way in tomorrow.”

Will resisted the urge to sigh - it wasn’t like it would change anything. “Alright.” He said, a little stiffly. “Thank you.”

“No problem.” The mechanic answered. There was a beat of silence, another quick glance. “You, uh…you still dealin’ with that crazy ex of yours?”

“Hmm?” Will hummed, looking away from his truck.

“Last time you were in, someone had cut your ignition wire.” He reminded Will. “You said you had a pretty good idea who did it.”

“I did.”

“She still giving you trouble?”

“No, not anymore.” Will told him, thinking of Mikhail’s corpse sinking below the surface of Lake Pontchartrain.

The mechanic looked puzzled. “Sir. All due respect - but just how many more crazy ex-girlfriends do you have?”

“None, actually.”

“Then…do you have any idea who would have done this?”

Will was quiet.

He didn’t have a lot of friends in New Orleans, almost no one he was especially close to, no one he had any problem with, no one he could think of who would want to do something like this.

Well.

Hannibal, maybe. But why he would, Will didn’t know. If Hannibal wanted to get his attention, if he wanted Will to hear him out, to take him back, there were easier ways of doing it. Why would he vandalize his car, why would he go to such great lengths to strand him at the bar (and then not even make an appearance), when he could always just call him? Especially when Hannibal had always prided himself on his gift for persuasion? When he had always shied away from anything that even remotely resembled coercion? It didn’t make any sense.

But more than that.

It didn’t feel like Hannibal.

“...No.” Will admitted quietly.

The mechanic was frowning at him. “You got a lawyer? ‘Cause if you don’t, I know a good one-”

“No, that’s okay.” Will said, shaking his head. “Really. Thank you, though. I appreciate all your help.”

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He ended up phoning Nadine for a ride.

He didn’t want to. He felt incredibly guilty as he was dialing her number, as he was waiting for her to pick up, knowing that he was pulling her away from work, away from her evening…but he didn’t have anybody else he could call.

“Hi, honey. Everything alright?”

“Hey. Yeah, everything’s fine.”

“You get your car fixed?”

Will frowned. “How did you-”

“Ronny told me.” She explained, and despite the fact that he knew she didn’t mean anything by it, Will still felt a small stab of annoyance, knowing she and Ronny had been talking about him behind his back. “So? You get a new tire?”

Will swallowed. “Yeah.” He said. “But, uh, they figured out there’s something else wrong with it. They need to pick up this part to fix it.”

“How long’s that gonna take?”

“The mechanic said it should be done sometime tomorrow. He’s gonna call me when it’s done.”

“Wait. Where are you?” She asked next. She sounded worried. “Are you still at the shop or did you make it home okay?”

Will bit his lip, hating himself. “That’s, um. That’s why I’m calling.” He told her. “I was wondering - I-I-I was hoping - if you're not too busy, that is - if…if you could give me a ride home?”

The pause is nanoseconds long, if that, but it still feels like forever before she finally answers. “Of course, honey. Which shop ya at?”

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Nadine didn’t keep him waiting long.

“Well, hello there, young man!” She called when she pulled up to the shop, grinning at him widely. “Fancy seein’ you here. Need a ride?”

Will mirrored her smile weakly.

“If you’re offering.” He joked, sliding into the passenger seat beside her.

Nadine chuckled. She waited until he had closed the door before she spoke again. “Ooh, I was so glad when you called me.” She said sincerely as she pulled away. “It’s been slow all day today. Hardly any customers. No one to talk to, hardly nothin’ to do...I tell you what, honey, if I had to spend another *minute* in there by myself, I’d’a done lost my mind.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear that.” Will told her. “I was worried I’d be inconveniencing you, asking you to come get me.”

Nadine scoffed. “Don’t ever worry about that, honey.” She said, waving a dismissive hand. “I’m always happy to help you out.”

“Good to know.”

They chatted for the rest of the drive about little things, harmless, forgettable things, things that didn’t really matter, things to pass the time. Nadine told Will about her week, and he told her about his. They talked about the weather, about Ronny, the charity drive Nadine’s church was organizing, about fishing.

Neither of them mentioned Hannibal, and the subject's absence was obvious, gaping, impossible to be unaware of, in ways that only the taboo and offensive can be.

Nadine dropped Will off with the promise that she’d be back in the morning to take him to the garage for his truck. Will thanked her. Waved goodbye to her as she drove away.

Then he turned and slowly climbed the porch steps to his dark and empty house, wishing that there was someone, anyone, real or imaginary, waiting for him inside.

The silence that had reigned so loud for so long was finally shattered the next morning, when a loud rapping sounded suddenly at his door. Will answered it warily, and was surprised to find Nadine on the other side, a large casserole dish balanced on her arm.

"It's tuna." She told him, beaming. "I've seen you buy it a couple times at the station, and I know you like fishin' so I figured it was a safe bet."

"No, tuna's great." Will said, more than a little taken aback to have had the heavy dish thrust into his empty, unsuspecting hands. "But, uh, you didn't have to do that, you know."

"I know I didn't. I wanted to."

"Well, thank you. Thanks, Nadine, really." Will said, shifting from one foot to the other uncomfortably. He hoped this wasn't going to become a regular practice, something he could expect from her - he already owed her more than he could ever pay back. "Here, let me go put this in the fridge real quick. Come in."

Nadine was only too happy to oblige and followed him down the hall to the kitchen.

"Can I get you anything?" Will asked over his shoulder. "Would you like something to drink?"

"Oh, no thank you, baby." She said, craning her neck to look at the high ceiling, the intricately carved molding, the expensive equipment and appliances that had been gathering dust since Hannibal left. "I'm fine."

Will dutifully put the casserole in the fridge and then turned back to Nadine. "Are you sure there isn't anything I can get for you?"

"No, I'm alright." She said, distracted as she continued to look around the room. She seemed to hesitate then, as if she were reluctant to ask her next question. "Honey, you own this house? Or are you rentin'?"

Will swallowed. “Well, I um...neither. Actually.”

Nadine frowned, her forehead puckering. “What’cha mean, ‘neither’?”

“...It’s, um…it’s his house.” He admitted quietly, looking quickly away. He couldn’t face her - he already knew what he’d find waiting for him.

“His…” Nadine breathed faintly, as if stunned. “Will. This is *his* house?”

Will nodded.

“Did he…Honey, I don’t understand. If this is his house, then why’d *he* leave?”

“...I don’t know.” Will told her honestly. He had often wondered the same thing, and the best that he could come up with was that it was Hannibal’s way of maintaining control - of knowing exactly where Will was, where he could find him if he wanted or needed to. But he doubted Nadine would like hearing that. “I tried to leave. I told him I was. But he insisted that I stay and that he go. That he bought the house for me.”

Nadine’s shock seemed to have worn off, because she was frowning again. “Will. I’m sure I don’t got to tell you this, but nobody does nothin’ for nothin’.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Nadine was quiet for a while then. “Look, honey. I don’t know exactly what Ronny’s paying you, but I know it can’t be much. How you gonna afford to pay your bills when they come?”

Will bit his lip. “To be honest, I hadn’t planned on being here that long.”

“You leavin’? When?”

“Soon as Ronny doesn’t need me anymore, I guess.”

“And where you gonna go then?” Nadine demanded.

Will tasted blood. “...I don’t know.”

Nadine considered what he had told her, and the silence seemed to stretch unreasonably, uncomfortably long.

“Will. Honey. Where exactly *is* your boyfriend?” She asked eventually.

“I don’t know.”

“Has he…asked you for anything since he left?”

“No.”

“Has he tried to contact you at all?”

Will shook his head, not trusting himself to speak.

Nadine heaved a sigh.

“I don’t like this, honey.” She informed him. “I don’t like anything about it. This ain’t your house, it’s his. You’ve got no legal claim to it, no rights. He can come back anytime he wants. He can throw you out at any time and there’d be nothing you could do about it. And God only knows what he could do if he decided to get the cops involved.”

“He’s not gonna do anything like that.”

“He’s plannin’ something- this whole thing stinks.” Nadine insisted. “And besides, he’s hurt you before and you know there ain’t nothing to stop him from doing it again.”

“No. It’s different this time.” Will told her quietly.

“Will, that’s just what he wants you to think-”

“No, Nadine, you don’t know him like I do.” Will said, shaking his head. “Look, I’d be the first person to assume the worst when it comes to him, with what he’s doing, but I’m telling you, this isn’t like him. He’s not gonna try anything.”

“Hon-”

“Nadine. Can we please not talk about this?” He snapped. “Can we please just go?”

She took a step back from Will then and pursed her lips, clearly displeased. “Alright.” She said after a moment. Will had never heard her sound so stiff. “Sure, honey. Let’s go.”

Without another word, she turned on her heel and marched back out. Will sighed and trailed silently after her through the house and out the door, his head hanging, feet dragging, hating himself. Neither spoke as they climbed into the car, and Nadine waited until after she had turned the key in the ignition before finally addressing Will again.

“You mind if I turn on the radio?” She asked. Will shrugged.

“It’s your car.” He reminded her miserably. “Do whatever you want.”

She refused to look at him as she reached for the dial.

“-come back, brothers and sisters, welcome back, and thank you for joining us on this blessed, blessed day. Praise today, praise this day the Lord has made for us and let us rejoice with the knowledge that we are so loved-”

Will shifted, turned slightly in his seat. Tried to put as much distance between himself and the radio as he could before his seat belt stopped him from going any further. Tried his best to tune out the words that were demanding they be heard.

“-ather than begin our program like we usually do with a passage from the Bible, I’d like to do something a little different today and read ‘The Farmer and the Snake’, one of the stories from *Aesop’s Fables* .”

There was the sound of shuffling papers and a throat being cleared. Will clenched his teeth, trying to hold in the frustrated groan that was threatening to become a scream.

“‘One winter a farmer found a snake stiff and frozen with cold. He had compassion on it, and taking it up, placed it in his bosom. The snake was quickly revived by the warmth, and resuming its natural instincts, bit its benefactor, inflicting on him a mortal wound. “Oh,” cried the farmer with his last breath, “I am rightly served for pitying a scoundrel.”’

There was another pause, more insufferable, grating background noise.

“Okay, everyone, there’s a lot to talk about here, a lot of simple wisdom we can all appreciate, some advice we can all use, but I think it would be best to start with the moral of the story. What is it? What’s the point it’s trying to make?” A slight pause, dramatic effect. “The answer is quite simple, really, and it’s that kindness to evil will be met by betrayal…Let me say that again. Kindness to evil will be met by betrayal. Now this is not something we don’t already know, right? We all know that evil doesn’t love us back, but so often, we allow

ourselves to be courted by it, to surrender to it, anyway. And why is that? I see so many people today, especially young people, who are so disillusioned with life, that they turn to things like tobacco, drugs, alcohol, and sex, despite knowing how bad these things are for them, how destructive they are, despite knowing that these things are a temporary pleasure that will only make everything worse for them in the long run. So why do we do it? Why do we want the things that are bad for us? Why do we give ourselves to the Devil's temptations and let ourselves be defiled and ruined by them? It's because we live in a broken society, a society that tells us God is a lie, a society that mocks the righteous, and no longer values things like community, morals, and basic decency, but tells us that our happiness, our value, lies in whatever is quick, and easy, and available. This is the Devil, trying to ensnare you and enslave you, trying to deny you your grace, your rightful place in the kingdom of God. Because as we all know, the Devil doesn't come to us with red horns and a tail. No, my brothers and sisters, the Devil comes to us as everything we've ever wanted, and in this day and age, we have strayed so far from the love and salvation of our Lord-"

Will sat silent and unmoving in his seat and wanted nothing more than to bash his skull against the window of the car until either the bone or glass was shattered.

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Will had been so focused on ignoring Nadine's irritatingly sanctimonious radio program that he didn't even notice they were heading in the wrong direction until she suddenly turned into the parking lot behind Ronny's bar. He sat up slowly, confused, glancing over at her nervously.

"Um. Nadine?" He asked, wondering if she wasn't going to take him out to the garage after all. "What are we doing here?"

"Ronny asked me to stop by before you opened tonight." She told him as she shut off the car. She wasn't looking at him. Either she was still upset with him or she was lying. Will couldn't tell. "Why don't you come in with me? I'm not sure how long this will take."

Will swallowed down a sigh as he climbed out of the car and followed her across the lot to the bar. It was still early - they wouldn't be open for another couple hours, but Ronny must

have known Nadine was coming, because the door swung open when she pushed against it. He'd left it unlocked.

"Hey, Ronny." Nadine called out as she stepped inside, Will a few steps behind her. "How are ya?"

"Oh. I could be better." He drawled. He was sitting at one of the tables in the middle of the bar, a tumbler of whiskey in his hand and two empty chairs on either side of him. "But I know better than to complain to you."

"Clearly." Nadine quipped, easing herself down into one of the chairs before she turned and looked back at Will, who was still hovering by the door. "What'cha doin' way over there, honey?" She asked gently, motioning for him. "Come sit down."

Will hesitated briefly before he crossed the room and sank reluctantly onto the one remaining chair at the table, far too aware that they were both watching him closely. He kept his gaze down, avoiding their eyes.

A few beats of awkward silence passed. Will refused to be the one to break it - it was obvious that Nadine had lied to him. That she and Ronny had planned this meeting for him, that they were in on whatever this was together. That they had something to say and they had reason to believe he wouldn't have come here on his own if he knew what they wanted to discuss with him. Fine. If they wanted to talk, they could talk. He had nothing to say.

From the corner of his vision, he could see Nadine twisting her fingers over the tabletop. Nervous. She didn't want to mess this up, push him further away.

"...Will." She said eventually. "I'm sure you can guess what this is about."

Will had been glaring down at a small chip in the wood grain, but he risked a quick glance across the table then. Nadine was staring at him with more pity than a person had any right being capable of. Ronny looked like he'd rather be anywhere else than where he was at that moment, but his mouth was set in a determined line. He'd stay. He'd see this through, no matter how bad it got. Will swallowed, overwhelmed.

“I try to avoid ‘guessing’ as much as possible when it comes to people.” He muttered at last. “It never ends well for me when I do.”

“Honey, nothing bad is going to happen to you.” Nadine said firmly. “We just want to talk.”

“Alright, then. Talk.” Will snapped. “What do you want to say?”

If she was surprised by his biting tone, she didn’t show it, but Ronny’s expression immediately hardened at his words.

“You watch your mouth, boy.” He said. “She’s just tryin’ to help you.”

Will winced. He wished Ronny would have slapped him - he was sure it would have hurt less.

He forced himself to take a deep breath. “Sorry.” He mumbled, dropping his head again.

“That’s alright, honey. I know you didn’t mean it. You’re going through a lot right now.” Nadine assured him. He heard Ronny huff quietly a moment later. And even though Will wasn’t looking, couldn’t see it, he knew Nadine well enough to know she was glowering at Ronny, annoyed with how he was handling things.

Will shook his head. “That’s no excuse for treating you like that.”

Nadine reached out and took Will’s hand in hers. She squeezed it gently. “You can make it up to me by hearing what we have to say.”

Will heaved another sigh and nodded. “Okay.”

She waited a moment, studying his face before she continued. “We’re really worried about you, Will.”

“I’m fine-”

“No, you’re not.” Nadine said firmly. “Honey, you are far too thin. You were always small, but this-” She waved at his skeletal frame, the clothes that were hanging off him. “-this is dangerous. You passed out here last night, didn’t you?”

“I didn’t pass out!” Will protested, feeling the blood rush to his face. “I just...I fell asleep. That’s all.”

“You fell asleep?” Nadine repeated, raising an eyebrow at him.

“It was two in the morning! I was tired!”

“You’ve never fallen asleep here before.” Ronny reminded him, turning his glass of whiskey in his hand.

Will sputtered. “W-okay, I’m sorry for the *one time* that I did.”

“One time too many, kid.” Ronny grunted. “Seriously. When I came in and saw you, I thought for sure you were dead.”

“You sleepin’ okay, baby?” Nadine quickly cut in. “You getting enough?”

“Yes.” Will said through his teeth. It wasn’t exactly a lie - what exactly constituted ‘enough’ was debatable.

“Hmm.” Nadine hummed, looking at the heavy, purple circles under his eyes. “I don’t think you are.”

“Look.” Will said impatiently. He was prickly by nature, and it only got worse when people started looking too close, when they started trying to pick him apart. “I know you’re worried about me and I appreciate it, but you don’t need to be. Okay? I show up to work on time everyday and I do everything I’m supposed to do while I’m here.”

Ronny snorted. “Oh, do ya?” He asked, his tone fairly dripping with sarcasm.

“I-I get by.” Will said defensively, shooting him a glare. “I can still function-”

“Barely.”

“Ronny, enough.” Nadine snapped.

“What? I’m just sayin’-”

“Stop antagonizing the boy.” She said before turning back to Will. “Answer me honestly, honey. Are you sleeping okay?”

“I...some nights better than others.”

“What about food?” She pressed him. “How ya eatin’?”

Will shrugged, looking back at the chip in the table.

“Will.”

“I can’t.” Will mumbled. “It doesn’t…I…”

He trailed off, not sure what to say, how to explain himself. Nadine was still holding her hand in his. When he tried to pull away, she didn’t let him.

“Will.” She said quietly, gently. “Have you...baby, have tried to hurt yourself?”

“No.” Will told her, shaking his head firmly.

“Have you... *thought* about it?”

Will looked up at her sharply. Nadine met his glare evenly, without judgment, unfazed and serene.

It made him furious.

“No.” He lied.

Nadine didn’t react. She didn’t even blink. And if Will hadn’t seen that same look on Hannibal’s face so many times before, he might have actually thought that she believed him.

But he knew better.

This time, when he pulled away, Nadine let him go.

An awkward, heavy silence settled over them.

“We’re not judging you, Will.” Nadine said eventually. “We just want to help you.”

“You can’t help me.” Will mumbled at the ground.

“I know.” She admitted. She sounded so sad about it. There was a small pause. “Will. Have you thought about…talking to somebody?”

Will eyed her warily. “What do you mean?”

“I mean like a professional. Someone who can help you the way we can’t.” Nadine explained. “A therapist. Or-or a psychiatrist.”

Will stared at her.

And then, before he could stop it, a tiny giggle bubbled up his throat and burst from his lips. And then another. And another. Will brought his hands up to cover his mouth, trying to hold them in, but there was nothing he could do to hide the peals of hysterical laughter erupting out of him. Across the table, Ronny sat stunned, watching him uneasily, but Nadine kept her expression blank.

“Will.” She said, reaching out and nudging him firmly. “Will.”

Will gasped for breath.

Choked.

And to his horror, began to sob.

Nadine was quick to pass Will a handful of napkins, but Ronny sat back in his seat, edging away from him. He looked as if he regretted agreeing to this meeting. Like he regretted every decision he had ever made that had brought him there.

“S-sorry.” Will told him between gulps of air.

“Nothin’ to be sorry for.” Ronny said gruffly. He still seemed uncomfortable. “Let it out, kid.”

They waited patiently as Will’s breathing gradually evened out, and it was only when he finally stopped crying that Nadine spoke again.

“Will.” She said. “Why did you laugh? Why were you crying?”

Will was silent, thoughts whirling. He thought about that fateful first meeting with Hannibal, and the sudden, horrible, irreversible turn his life had taken in that moment. He thought about all those sessions with Bedelia and the gradual realization that Hannibal loved him. He thought about the last time he saw Bedelia. The look on her face right before she died while he sat there and watched.

He could only imagine what would happen with the next psychiatrist he met.

“It’s hard to explain.” He told Nadine at last. She frowned, studying him, trying to understand.

“Do you think a psychiatrist won’t be able to help you?” She asked.

Will couldn’t help but grimace. “They haven’t been able to so far.”

Ronny's drink sat unfinished in front of him. He had drawn his arms across his chest, his bad arm folded awkwardly over his good one. "Just how many psychiatrists you been to before, kid?"

Will shrugged. "A lot. They thought I had autism when I was a kid."

"Well…maybe this one will be different." Nadine quickly interjected, trying to be optimistic. "Maybe you'll meet someone who will be able to help you."

"No one can help me." Will whispered, shaking his head.

"Oh, come on, kid." Ronny sighed impatiently. "Quit feelin' sorry for yourself."

"It's not that." Will insisted. "I don't feel sorry for myself. I just know…what's wrong with me can't be fixed."

"What, heartache?" Ronny asked him. "Son, you're old enough to know by now that breaking up with someone ain't the end of the world."

Will didn't answer him.

But he didn't need to.

"He's your soulmate." Nadine said then, almost dreamily, as she stared off into space.

Both Ronny and Will's head swiveled sharply on their necks to stare at her.

" *What* ?" Ronny all but spat.

“That’s what his mama said.”

Ronny looked back over at Will. “I thought you said your parents were dead.”

“They are.” Will assured him flatly.

“He loves you.” Nadine continued in that same far-off voice, her gaze unfocused. “She says there isn’t anything he wouldn’t do for you.”

“Oh, for God’s sake.” Ronny muttered, rolling his eyes. “Nadine. Hey! Knock it off. We’re supposed to be helpin’ him get over this asshole, not fucking encouragin’ him.”

Nadine blinked a bit, shifted in her chair. “Oh, right.” She murmured, so quietly Will almost didn’t hear her. “Right. Sorry. I’m Sorry.”

There was something different in her expression when she looked back up at Will then. Some quiet, new understanding that wasn’t there before.

It was almost like she knew.

Ronny cleared his throat. “Alright.” He said firmly. “Kid. What do *you* think you should do?”

Will frowned at him. “What do you mean?”

“Well, you clearly don’t wanna talk to us. Sounds like you won’t talk to no shrink. So who *are* you willing to talk to? Huh? What is it you think you need to do to get better?”

Will swallowed, licked his lips. “I don’t know if I can.” He said. “But I think…I think the best thing I can do is to…to get away from here.”

Ronny nodded, as if he expected him to say that. As if he agreed.

“Now wait a minute.” Nadine protested, looking from Ronny to Will and back again. “Honey, you can’t just *leave* ! What are you-”

“Nadine, he had never planned on staying here.” Ronny reminded her. “He was just passing through here on his way to somewhere else.”

“If you fire him now, Ronald, I swear to God-”

“I ain’t gonna fire him *now* , Nadine.” Ronny snapped. “Surgeon says I need another week before I can resume all normal activity and I promised him I’d let him stay until I was cleared.”

“Then why you talkin’ like you can’t wait to push him out the door?”

“Because we need to be practical about this! He needs to have a plan so that when the time finally does come for him to move on-”

Will sighed and sat back in his seat as they continued to bicker back and forth, their voices growing steadily louder and louder with each exchange.

“You don’t have to be so insensitive about it!”

“I ain’t gonna sugarcoat it, Nadine! Quite frankly, the boy is scarin’ me!”

Will wondered how much time they had set aside for this. How much longer he could expect it to go on. Probably at least until the bar opened. Which was hours away. He wondered if either of them would notice if he just got up and left. Probably. Oh, who was he kidding? They'd definitely notice. It probably wasn't worth it to even try.

It was then, as Will was debating with himself what he should do, wondering how much more of this torture he could take, that there came the sound of the bar's door opening from behind him, just barely discernible over the arguing but loud enough to stop Ronny mid-rant.

"Hey, we're closed!" He called irritably out to whoever had just stepped inside. "Come back in two hours."

If the customer said something back, Will missed it, because Nadine suddenly reached over and took Will's hand again in hers.

"It's gonna be okay, baby." She told him quietly, her thumb brushing back and forth across his knuckles.

"You don't know that." Will muttered back.

"I do know that. Your mama says so." Nadine said. "She wanted me to tell you that."

"My mama was as crazy as the day is long." Will snapped. "Sorry if I don't put much faith in what she says."

Nadine had just opened her mouth to reply when Ronny suddenly shouted.

"HEY!" He said, rising abruptly to his feet. "Did you hear me?! I said we're closed! You need to leave!"

What happened next was so fast that it seemed to happen all at once.

First, there was the unmistakable, deafening sound of a gunshot.

And then, almost immediately after, the air over Will's head seemed to ripple, shift, shatter. And it was just as Will realized what was happening, not even a split second later, just as he felt the bullet whizz above him and stir his hair, that Ronny stumbled and fell back in an explosion of scarlet blood, white bone, and gray matter.

Nadine screamed, loud, ear-piercing, hysterical and Will grabbed her and dragged her to the ground, out of the line of fire. It only got worse, louder, once they were down, and it took Will a moment to understand why - Ronny was lying beside them, inches away, half his face gone, spongy, raw hamburger meat leaking out of the gaping hole in his face.

He almost threw up. He felt his stomach heave, tasted burning acid in his throat, and he quickly turned his head so he wouldn't have to see what was left of Ronny, what had happened to him. Through the forest of tables and chair legs, Will found himself staring at a pair of heavy, black boots across the room. His breath caught, the swell of nausea suddenly died.

The shooter was still there.

Ronny's killer was standing between them and the front door.

He was the only thing between them and escape.

Will panted, his mind racing, instincts screaming, trying to figure out what to do, how to save himself, save Nadine.

The only other way out was the back door. But it was so far away, past the bartop, through the storeroom. There was no way they'd be able to make it that far without getting shot first.

So what were they supposed to…

And then he remembered.

Remembered Ronny showing him around all those weeks ago, explaining how everything worked, how to run it.

It's usually pretty quiet. But if you ever need it, there's a shotgun under the bar.

Will released the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding.

The bartop was between them and the back door. It was closer, realistic, doable. If he could just get behind the bar, then maybe…

…Maybe they had a chance of making it out of here after all.

Will turned back to Nadine, lying beside him on the ground.

"Oh, Ronny!" She was sobbing, clenching her shaking head between her shaking hands. "No, no, no, God, please no!"

"Nadine!" Will hissed, and his heart jolted fearfully when he heard the sound of slowly approaching footsteps behind him. "Nadine! We need to move!"

"No! No!" She cried when he nudged her. "I can't!"

"You have to!" Will urged her. "Listen to me! I'm going to distract him - when I say 'go', you need to get behind the bar."

“No, don’t leave me!” She pleaded, grabbing for him, her nails digging painfully into his arms. “Please, don’t leave me!”

“I’m not going to leave you.” Will told her. The shooter was closer now, halfway between them and the door. He was taking his time. Playing with them. “I promise, I’m going to do everything I can to get you out of this. You just have to trust me.”

Nadine hesitated, and then nodded frantically, her cheeks wet with tears.

“Stay low.” Will breathed. “Get behind the bar - Ronny has a shotgun under the counter - have it ready.”

She nodded one last time and slowly, reluctantly, released him.

Will nodded back, just once. Sucked in a breath. Tried not to think about the fact that this might not work. That it all might go horribly, horribly wrong.

“Go!” He yelled, pushing himself up to a crouch and scrambling away, away from Nadine, as she began to crawl toward the bar.

He kept close to the ground, using the furniture to shield himself as he moved. He didn’t know what he was doing. He didn’t have a plan beyond getting away, of trying to draw the shooter’s attention to him. All Will knew was that he had to keep him away from Nadine, to distract him long enough for Nadine to get herself somewhere safe, until she could get the gun.

He managed to make it to the wall, opposite from where the shooter was now standing. Will panted, staring at the unmoving boots across the room. He wasn’t moving. Why wasn’t he moving? What was he doing?

He couldn’t see Nadine. From the angle he was now, he couldn’t say for sure if she had made it behind the bar or not, but he hadn’t heard the gun go off again, either, so he assumed she had. Had she found the shotgun? Did she even know how to use one? What was he supposed to do now?

For a while, no one moved. No one spoke. Nothing happened. Will remained pressed against the wall and air continued to flow freely in and out his lungs. Each inhale felt like a taunt. Every exhale he was convinced would be his last.

It was silent enough to hear a pin drop.

And then -

“You!” A loud and booming voice, the words heavily accented. It was familiar, somehow. He knew that voice - how did he know that voice? “Come!”

He had to be talking to Will - though he couldn’t see his face, Will could see the boots were pointed at him, addressing him.

Will licked his lips, swallowed dry. “I’d rather not, thanks!”

“You come out now or I shoot her!”

Will gritted his teeth.

This wasn’t how he thought he’d die.

But he couldn’t let Nadine die for him.

He rose slowly.

When he finally saw the shooter, Will was so shocked that he swore for an instant, his heart forgot to beat.

It was Yuri's assistant. The one who had worked the counter in his bodega. The man Hannibal had had to bribe to see Yuri. What was his name, it was in the papers...

Boris.

Will stared at him. Boris scowled back. Waved him over with his gun.

"You come. Now!"

Will's jaw clenched so hard the damaged muscles screamed. "What do you want?" He asked hoarsely, buying for time. "Is this about Yuri?"

Boris ignored him. "Where is Lecter?"

"I have no idea."

"You lie!"

"I'm not!" Will insisted. "I don't know where he is!"

Boris snarled and slammed his enormous fist on a nearby table. The ashtray that was sitting on top rattled. "You tell me where he is!"

“Look.” Will said loudly. “Lecter’s not here. Look around. See for yourself. He’s not here.”

“I know Lector not here!” Boris snapped. “I watch you. For days I watch you. Only you. I never see him. WHERE IS HE?”

“I don’t know!” Will shouted back. “I don’t know where he is!”

It was quiet then, as the two stood staring at one another. Boris’s chest was heaving with fury, his nostrils flared wide like a bull’s, his forehead puckered. He seemed to be thinking. Will watched him warily for a few excruciatingly long seconds before his face suddenly split into a wide and wicked-looking grin.

“He will come.” He said. “For you.”

Will stiffened, surprised. “No, he won’t.” He said quickly. “We’re not together anymore.”

Boris laughed. It was a cruel sound. “Please. Everybody know about you and Lecter - all newspapers talk about. He surrender to FBI for you. You break him out of prison. You always come for each other. If I take you now, he will come for you.”

Will’s eyes narrowed. “What makes you think I’ll let you take me anywhere?”

Boris brandished the gun, pointing it at Will. “You come. Or I shoot you.”

Will scoffed. “You shoot me, you lose your only chance of finding Lecter.” He said. “Assuming he even comes.”

“I don’t shoot to kill you.” Boris told him. “I shoot to make easy take you with me.” He cocked the gun. “Come. Or I shoot.”

Will's mind was racing, trying to stall for time, trying to think what to do. "He won't come." He said firmly. "You're wasting your time."

Boris's face was like a thundercloud. "You come!" He barked. "Now!" And when Will still didn't move, he turned the gun toward the bar. "Or I shoot her."

Will felt his blood run cold. His eyes darted to the bar, the thin (too thin) wooden barrier that separated Nadine from a bullet. He was too far away to hear her, to track where she was. Couldn't see her from where he stood. Couldn't check to see if Boris was even pointing the gun in the right direction at her.

It didn't matter.

No matter where she was, she was far too exposed. She wasn't safe. And Will knew Boris would kill her in a heartbeat and not think twice about it.

He clenched his jaw so tight, his teeth creaked. The damaged nerve sang.

If he wanted to protect Nadine, he didn't have a choice.

He took a small step forward.

"Alright." He said, raising his empty hands as he moved closer. Boris kept his gun trained on the bar, ensuring Will behaved. "I'll go with you. Just don't hurt her."

Boris grunted, pleased.

He was only about a foot away from Boris when Nadine suddenly screamed.

“NO, WILL, NO!” She shrieked, leaping to her feet and swinging Ronny’s shotgun to point at Boris.

“NADINE, NO!” Will shouted, but it was too late.

Boris fired the gun. Will watched, horrified, as Nadine flew back, scarlet spraying from her chest. The gun fell from her grasp, clattering to the floor. She brought her hands to the bleeding hole in her chest, as though trying to hold herself together. Then she slowly raised her head and looked at Will.

“W-Will?” She whispered weakly before she collapsed.

She fell slowly. Far too slowly. And Will could only stand there watching, rooted to the spot, paralyzed, refusing to believe it was really happening. It was only when she disappeared from view completely again that he finally snapped out of it.

With an inhuman roar, Will threw himself at Boris.

He knew he had a gun.

He knew Boris was bigger than him, heavier than him. That he didn’t stand a chance to take him in a fight.

He knew that Boris could kill him.

Maybe a part of him was hoping that he would.

He should have known better.

Boris grabbed him easily. Will never even managed to land a single blow.

He yelled, fighting wildly, blindly, uselessly, in Boris's hold.

When Boris brought the butt of his gun down against the back of his skull, Will never even saw it coming.

All he knew was that there was a sudden explosion of pain, a burst of bright white light, and then nothing.

—-------

The first thing he was aware of was the pain.

It was sharp. Pounding. An impossible-to-ignore pulse at the back of his head.

Will groaned. Tried to reach up and feel the hurt, to figure out what was wrong, what had happened, only for something cold and metal to dig painfully against his wrists and yank them back, holding him in place.

He couldn't move.

Slowly, cautiously, his heart drumming anxiously, Will opened his eyes.

At first he saw only a nauseating smear of color. Indistinct. Nothing he could claim he knew or recognized or even understood. But then he blinked, and the image began to slowly sharpen.

He almost wished it hadn't - ignorance and bliss, and all that.

Because across the room, leaning casually, confidently, against the doorframe, was Boris. His thick arms folded over his enormous chest. Watching him. It took Will another minute to realize where they were, that he was back at his house, that he was tied to a chair, that his hands were cuffed painfully behind him. Will twisted in a jerky, flopping sort of way and it got him absolutely nowhere. Boris continued to eye him impassively, and when it was obvious that Will was really and truly awake, that he wouldn't be slipping back to unconsciousness anytime soon, he tilted his head and called something over his shoulder in Russian.

Will winced at the sound and tasted bile. He allowed his eyes to slip shut when he heard footsteps echo suddenly from somewhere just beyond where Boris was standing. They were loud, offensively loud, to Will's ringing ears, and they only got louder the closer they got. Will kept his eyes firmly closed, breathing slowly through his nose, willing himself not to be sick. Even when they finally came to a stop, just a few feet away from him, he refused to look.

"Mr. Graham." His English was better than Boris's, but his accent was thicker than Yuri's. "You're a hard man to find."

Will cracked an eye. Raised his head to stare up at the man before him.

He was older than Will. Older than Hannibal, but not by much. His hair was thick and black, flecked with gray at the temples and in his beard. His eyes were a curious, pale shade of green, and they danced with a vicious sort of amusement as he gazed coldly down at Will, studying him. Will frowned.

"Do I know you?" He asked. He sounded dazed, even to himself.

"No." The man said simply, crouching down, so that he was kneeling at Will's level. "But I know all about you, Will."

Now that he was closer, Will could see a thin, pink scar extending down the side of his face from his ear to his chin. It wasn't nearly as thick or as ugly as Will's, but he thought it was

strange that they were both marked the same way, and on the same side.

The man evidently thought so too, because he reached out and stroked Will's cheek. The nerve twitched beneath his skin and the muscle seized. "We match." He said with a deep throaty chuckle.

"Stop touching me." Will muttered, trying to shift away. From the other side of the room, Boris shouted something at Will in Russian. The man chuckled again.

"Come now, Boris." He said, patting Will's face a little too forcefully for the action to be considered friendly, or even good-natured. "Cut the poor man some slack, hmm? I'm sure he's very confused right now."

He drew back a little bit from Will, giving him space.

Or at least the illusion of it.

"My name," He then pronounced slowly, deliberately, as if to impress upon Will just how important it was that he knew this, "Is Dmitri."

Will blinked. "...Is that supposed to mean something to me?"

Dmitri grinned at him. His teeth were very straight, but stained nicotine yellow. "Probably not. Not yet, anyway."

WIll tried sitting up, but with the way they had bound his arms behind the chair, he couldn't get very far. "Are you…" He licked his lips. His throat hurt. His head ached. It was hard to keep his thoughts straight. "Are you a friend of Yuri's?"

"'Friend'?" Dmitri echoed, raising an incredulous eyebrow. "No, no. Yuri was not my friend. I never even met him. He was…" He paused, thinking. "I don't know how you say it in

English. He worked for me."

"Employee." Will supplied flatly.

"Yes!" Dmitri agreed, snapping his fingers. "Employee!" Smiling, he pushed himself back to his feet. He towered over Will, and he had to crane his neck to watch as Dmitri pulled a cigarette from his pocket and stuck it between his teeth. "Did you know," He said conversationally, lighting it. "That we Russians are the best when it comes to computers. A lot of people think it's the Chinese, but they don't even come close to us. Hacking, programming...there isn't anything that we can't do." He exhaled a thick cloud of smoke. "When I first started my company thirty years ago, I knew I had created something unique. Special. That there were a lot of people who needed what I had to offer and would be willing to pay a lot of money to get it. But I had no idea at the time just how successful I would one day be."

Dmitri paused long enough to take a deep pull from his cigarette. "Yuri was very good at what he did." He said. "People came from very far away for his services. He was one of the best we ever had."

"Mmm." Will hummed, closing his aching eyes. "He made you a lot of money."

"Yes. He did." Dmitri agreed bitterly. "Yuri made me several million every year. And he wasn't planning on retiring anytime soon. So I'm sure you understand, then, my problem now that he's so unexpectedly gone."

Will sighed. "Yeah."

"Just like I'm also sure," Dmitri continued. "You understand why it was so important that I found you."

"I didn't kill Yuri." Will snapped, opening his eyes and glaring up at him.

“Of course you didn’t.” Dmitri scoffed. “It’s obvious that it was Lecter. That’s why I needed you - you’re the key to finding him.”

It took Will’s throbbing brain to realize what he was saying. “You don’t know where he is.”

“No one does.” Dmitri said. “It seems the only person who’s seen him in months is you.”

“You’re wasting your time.” Will told him. “I have no idea where Hannibal is. We’re not together anymore.”

Dmitri raised an eyebrow at him. “Something tells me if that were true, you’d be dead.”

“I’m not lying!” Will said, frustrated. “I haven’t seen him in over a week. He didn’t tell me where he was going. I don’t know where he is!”

“Yes, Boris told me you said the same thing to him.” Dmitri said, unconcerned, as he pulled something out from his pocket.

“Then what-”

He trailed off as Dmitri showed him what he was holding. It was Will’s phone. He had removed the protective case, and there was a new crack stretched across the screen, but it was definitely his. Will stared at it for a moment, and then looked back at Dmitri. For the first time since he’d woken up, he was starting to feel afraid.

“You have his number. Don’t you.” DmitrI phrased it like a question, but it was obvious that it wasn’t. Will swallowed.

“No.” He managed. “I deleted it.”

Dmitri's lip curled indulgently. "Really? How unfortunate."

His smile vanished far faster than it appeared, almost instantly, and when he took another quick step forward again, Will couldn't help but jump at the sudden movement.

"Luckily," He said, circling around Will, behind him. "That sort of information is very easy to recover if it's lost."

"What are you doing?" Will demanded, twisting his head to try and see him. Dmitri ignored him. He grabbed his bound hands. "Stop!"

Dmitri's grip was unyielding as he had forced Will's thumb against the phone's touch sensor, but that didn't stop Will from squirming uselessly in his hold. When Dmitri finally released him mere moments later, it was as if Will hadn't put up a fight at all.

"Thank you, Mr Graham." He murmured, moving away from Will and staring down at his now unlocked phone. "You've been most helpful."

Will's head snapped up again, about to snarl something he knew he'd probably regret, when he suddenly stopped, startled. Because it wasn't just him and Dmitri and Boris anymore - there was now a crowd of half a dozen other men gathered in the sitting room, staring stonily back at him. Will tensed, and from the corner of his vision, he saw Dmitri smirk.

"I hope you don't mind." He said, gesturing to the crowd. "I've brought some friends with me."

Will turned and glared at him. "Don't think you can't take him on your own?" He asked sarcastically.

"You mean like how you took him on your own, Mr. Graham?" Dmitri asked, his eyes darting down to Will's abdomen. "How'd that go for you?" When Will didn't answer, Dmitri cocked an eyebrow. "Nothing to say? That's alright - perhaps Dr. Lecter can enlighten me."

So saying, he turned his attention back to Will's phone.

He pressed something on the screen.

A moment later, Will heard a dial tone.

He closed his eyes - Dmitri must have put it on speakerphone.

He was going to force Will to hear everything. To hear Hannibal's voice one more time before he died.

The phone rang.

Will held his breath.

' *Don't pick up.* ' He prayed. ' *Please, please, Hannibal, don't pick up the phone-"*

The ringing stopped.

"Will, I-!"

He said it so quickly, in a rush, as if he expected Will to hang up as soon as he started talking, but Dmitri cut him off before he could say anymore.

"Not quite." He said, staring coldly at the phone. "Hello, Dr. Lecter."

There was a brief pause.

“Where’s Will?” Hannibal asked, and Will shuddered at his icy tone. He had heard Hannibal talk like that before. It usually meant someone was about to die.

“He’s right here.” Dmitri assured him, sparing Will a quick glance. “Don’t worry. I assure you he’s just fine.”

“Let me talk to him.”

“Of course.” Dmitri said silkily before shoving Will’s phone in his face. “Speak.”

Will blinked, confused, uncomprehending, amazed. His head was still throbbing, his thoughts were still sluggish, and his vision was still a bit smudged. It took him a moment to focus properly, and another to realize what was happening, what he was seeing and why.

Dmitri hadn’t called Hannibal.

He had FaceTimed him.

If Will wasn’t concussed, if he was thinking straight, he probably would have been furious. But in that moment, all he could feel was breathless agony. And if he wasn’t seeing Hannibal for the first time in almost two weeks, he may have been blind with rage…

But instead, all he saw was Hannibal.

Hannibal was frowning at him, his eyes creased with worry. “Will?” He called gently. “Are you alright? What’s happening? Talk to me, mylimasis-.”

Will continued to gape down at him, utterly transfixed, stunned, and speechless.

He gasped when Dmitri suddenly punched his stomach without warning. Boris and the others sniggered across the room.

“Talk!”

“Don’t touch him!” Hannibal snarled loudly over the phone. “Don’t you dare touch him! Will! Will!”

“I think that’s enough for now.” Dmitri said, pulling the phone away from Will as he continued to cough, desperate for air. “You and I have some unfinished business we need to discuss.”

“What business?” Will heard Hannibal growl. “I don’t know you. You and I have never met-”

“But you knew my employee, didn’t you? Yuri Ivanov?”

Hannibal was silent. Dmitri smiled.

“You know who I am now, don’t you?”

“Yes.” Hannibal answered curtly.

“Then you know why I’m here.” Dmitri said. “You owe me a lot of money, Dr. Lecter.”

Hannibal didn’t answer him right away, and Will knew he was thinking, trying to understand what was happening, how best to handle it. “Let Will go.” He said at last. “He’s not involved.

This is between you and me."

"Oh, no." Dmitri purred, turning to bless Will with a wide, sadistic grin. "I'm afraid I can't do that. Mr. Graham here is my insurance. How else was I supposed to convince you to meet me?"

There was a slight pause as Hannibal considered his words and weighed his options, as he debated the likelihood of convincing Dmitri to give Will up.

"Don't hurt him." He said at last.

"I assure you, I don't wish to." Dmitri told him. "But if you don't cooperate, then I'm afraid I'll have no choice."

"I'll do it. Whatever you want, I'll do it. Just don't hurt him."

"I promise, I won't touch a single hair on his head while we wait for you." Dmitri said. "But if you're not here at your house in twenty mintues, I can't guarantee you that he won't be harmed."

"No, I need more time." Hannibal said. To anyone else, he sounded calm, rational. But Will knew him well enough to know he was anything but. "I'm over an hour away. You need to give me more time than that."

"Fine. You have one hour. And Dr. Lecter - if you are even a minute late, then I'm sorry to say that Mr. Graham will be the one paying for your sins."

"I'll be there." Hannibal said firmly. "Let me talk to him one more time before I go."

Wordlessly, Dmitri held the phone back up to Will.

“Will.” Hannibal said, staring at him. He looked like he wanted nothing more than to reach through the glass screen and touch him. “Please talk to me. Have they hurt you?”

Hurt? Was he hurt? Had they hurt him? Yes. Yes, his head was killing him. The lights, the noise, none of it was helping. He was sure he had a concussion. And his stomach was sore, bruised from where Dmitri had beat him. But none of that mattered to Will. His brain could recover, if given enough time. And he was already breathing normally again. The pain he felt now was temporary. It would fade. It didn’t matter.

And it was nothing, *nothing* , compared to what they had already taken from him. What they would force him to live with for the rest of his life. What they were threatening to do to him.

“They killed Nadine.” He blurted.

Hannibal frowned. “What?”

“They killed Nadine.” He said again. It seemed important that he tell him this. “She’s dead. It’s my fault she’s dead-”

“Will.” Hannibal said firmly. “I’m sorry about Nadine, I am.” He wasn’t. Will knew Hannibal had always been jealous of her, of the relationship she had with him, the affection he gave her so freely. “But I can’t help her now. I can only help you.”

“You can’t help me.” Will said, beginning to panic. “They’re going to kill you. They’re going to kill us both.”

“They’re not going to kill either of us, Will. Everything’s going to be alright-”

“Don’t come!” Will begged him, straining at his bonds. “I’m dead anyway! Save yourself!”

“Be quiet!” Dmitri hissed, reaching out and slapping hard Will across the cheek, hard enough to make his vision swim and the ringing in his ears to grow deafening.

It took him more than a moment to recover.

“-told you not to touch him! Will! Will, listen to me, sweetheart, please! I’m going to save you. Do you understand me? I’m going to get you out. You just have to be patient. You just have to wait an hour for me. Can you do that? Can you please keep yourself safe for me until then?”

Will stared back at him silently. He knew his face so well, had studied it for so long, he knew it better than his own. But looking at it now, it felt like he was seeing it for the first time. The little scar below his eye from his fight with Jack. Another across the bridge of his nose, faint, barely there, an old injury from before he’d met Will. The sharp jut of his cheekbones. The gentle arc of his lip. The flecks of maroon scattered across his brown eyes. Will swallowed and felt his eyes begin to well with tears.

He’d probably never have another chance to see him again. Not like this. Dmitri would kill him as soon as Hannibal came for him. He wouldn’t give them the chance to touch, to speak, to hold each other in their arms as they died. He’d probably force Hannibal to watch from across the room as Will’s life slowly slipped away, powerless to save him when he was so close. This was the last time Will would have with him. To see him, speak with him.

He needed to tell him. He needed to tell him now, while he still had the chance, while he still could. Hannibal had to know. He needed Hannibal to know.

Will took a breath.

“I love you.” He said.

He watched as Hannibal’s lips parted, as his eyes widened, as he stared gaping at Will with wonder and awe.

It wasn't often that Hannibal was truly shocked by something. Will could count the number of times he'd witnessed it on one hand, and almost every one of those times had been his own doing.

It was nice to know he could still manage to surprise him.

It felt like an eternity had passed before Hannibal finally found his voice again.

"Will-" He began, but Dmitri snatched the phone away before he could say any more.

"One hour, Dr. Lecter." He reminded him. "No more. Take care."

"No, Will-!"

Dmitri ended the call before Hannibal could say anything else, and the silence that followed was jarringly loud, impossible to ignore. Will glared at him, hating him, and Dmitri smiled back, a slimy, slippery, evil slip of a thing that only made Will hate him more.

"That was good." Dmitri told him. "If he wasn't coming before, he certainly is now. Really, I can't thank you enough, Mr. Graham."

"He's going to kill you." Will spat back. He didn't believe it, not really, but he felt like he had to defend Hannibal in whatever way he could. "You don't stand a chance against him."

"Oh, I think I do." Dmitri said, sweeping his arm across the room, at the men gathered around them. "I have you as leverage, and the doctor's outnumbered eight to one." Dmitri leaned down, putting his face uncomfortably close to Will's. "He's not going to win this fight, Mr. Graham. He can't. Hannibal Lecter is going to die tonight. I guarantee it. The sooner you accept that, the better."

And without another word, Dmitri straightened, turned, and then sauntered away, back toward the kitchen.

“Watch him.” Will heard him say to Boris as he passed. “Make sure he doesn’t try anything. And if he does - make sure he won’t do it again.”

Boris nodded. Stroked the gun at his hip as he leered at Will. It wasn’t until Dmitri finally left the room that Will allowed himself to slump defeatedly back against his chair, arms straining against the handcuffs that held him in place.

This was it - the end of the line.

Because Dmitri was right - they couldn’t win this one.

Because Will was caught - useless - and Hannibal was outnumbered and walking into a trap.

And there was nothing they could do about it.

They had no one to help them. No one who could save them. Not this time.

It was just them. They were on their own.

They weren’t gonna make it.

They were gonna die.

They were gonna die that night.

Chapter End Notes

So the next chapter is the big one - the one we've been leading up to and the one I'm absolutely terrified to write.

In addition to the fact that I'm anticipating having a hard time writing it, I also have a lot of stuff going on in the next couple weeks - I'm going to be traveling soon, which will limit how much time I have to write, and I will be moving in a few weeks, which will probably take up a lot of my time.

I am estimating the next chapter will be posted in 4 weeks, probably in mid/late November.

As always, thanks so much for reading, I hope you all enjoyed!

I Had to Go Through Hell to Prove I’m Not Insane, Had to Meet the Devil Just to Know His Name

Chapter Summary

I have traveled through madness to find me.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will tugged half-heartedly against the handcuffs clasped around his wrists, wincing when the metal sliced even deeper into his raw flesh and blood seeped, warm and wet, into his saturated shirt cuffs, tacky against his skin. He pulled harder, ignoring the sharp bite of pain that followed, and then slumped defeatedly in his chair when the binds refused to give.

He had been pulling and twisting for a while now, trying to get free despite knowing that it was pointless. That no matter how hard he strained, the cuffs weren’t going to suddenly spring open for him. That even if they did, Boris would be there to stop him, and that even if he somehow managed to get past *him* , he would still have to face Dmitri and the others.That he was outnumbered and outmatched, that there wasn’t anything he could possibly do to get himself out of this one.

But even so, Will continued to fight against his restraints. Because stopping, doing nothing, felt like giving up. And he couldn’t give up - giving up now meant that he was giving up on Hannibal, that he was failing him. And Hannibal had always fought so hard for him, had always done the impossible when it came to him. So, despite the fact that his wrists were shredded and sore, despite the fact that his efforts had gotten him absolutely nowhere so far, and despite knowing that it was no use, Will refused to stop.

If not for his sake, then for Hannibal’s.

Across the room, Boris sat watching Will struggle, a cigarette dangling from his fingers, a ghost of a smirk on his lips. He hadn't said a word since Dmitri had left, nor did he seem the least bit concerned with what Will was doing. If anything, he seemed amused, no doubt understanding, as Will did, just how futile his attempts of escape truly were.

And apparently, everyone else knew it too, because no one had bothered to come check on him even once since they had left him alone with Boris. Behind his warden, just beyond sight in the kitchen, Will could hear the others speaking to one another loudly in Russian, their conversation punctuated every so often by the clink of glass. Will frowned. Were they drinking? How? There wasn't any alcohol in the house - he drank it all the night Hannibal left, and had refused to buy any more since, terrified of what he'd do with it if he did. So then where had they…

'Ronny's bar.' His brain reminded him miserably. 'Boris probably helped himself before he left.'

Will sighed, sagging further against the bindings that held him in place, and looked over toward the window. He had no idea what time it was, but he knew that it had been around noon when Boris had taken him and that it was dark now. But just how many hours had passed between the moment he had been captured and the moment he woke up, how much time had passed since Dmitri had called Hannibal, Will couldn't say for sure.

He hated it. He hated not knowing, despite the fact that it didn't really make much difference whether it was six o'clock or after midnight. It was just one more thing beyond his control, one more thing, however small, that he had been denied, one more reminder of just how helpless he was, that he was at Dmitri's mercy…

Will's thoughts were suddenly interrupted by the sound of glass shattering in the kitchen, and he couldn't help but wince when he heard it, couldn't help but grit his teeth at the merry swell of voices that followed. But beyond the little jerk, the little twitch of muscle, he didn't move. Refused to move. Refused to acknowledge Dmitri and the others any more than he already had to.

Because it made him angry, knowing that they were drinking in the other room, that they were being so careless with Hannibal's things, that they were comfortable enough, confident enough, with the situation to do so. Because they obviously knew they had the advantage. That they were the ones in control. That Will was bound so tight he couldn't move, and even

if he could, that there wasn't anything he could do to stop them. And they knew that Will knew that just as much as they did.

Still.

Will tilted his head. They were getting pretty loud. And that was the second glass they had broken since they'd started drinking. Just how much had they had? How much were they planning to have? He could understand having a drink to loosen up, indulging a bit before the hard work started, but from what it sounded like, they were well on their way to getting really and truly drunk. Will was a little surprised Dmitri was allowing it. Surely he understood that even if they were guaranteed to win, he was taking a huge risk with letting his men drink themselves stupid before a fight - that reaction times would be slower, mistakes more easily made, complications much more likely. Were they just that sure of themselves? So completely convinced that Hannibal couldn't possibly beat them all, even if they were completely wasted? They couldn't actually believe that, could they?

Will shook his head. Maybe he was missing something - it wasn't like he could see what was happening in there. Maybe just a few of them were drinking and the rest were just excited, eager for the approaching bloodshed and violence and taking it out on Hannibal's Waterford crystal cups.

He tried to ignore them. Tried to ignore his own pounding heart, and the fact that every second that passed meant that they were that much closer to the end, but no matter how hard he tried, he just couldn't do it.

Will heaved another sigh and, desperate for distraction, turned to stare out into the inky blackness beyond the sitting room window. It was so dark. There was no moon, no stars. Had it always been this dark at the house? He didn't think so - he could remember the cold, silver light of past full moons. But what about the stars? Had they ever been able to see them before? Or had they been too close to the city? He couldn't remember.

It bothered him that he couldn't remember, that he had never cared enough to pay attention. What else had he forgotten, overlooked, from his time here with Hannibal? What else had he taken for granted, deemed irrelevant? He realized now that it had all meant something, that every moment, every detail, had been important, and he wished now that he had appreciated all the things he'd had when he still had them. That he had thanked Hannibal more often when he'd had the chance. That he had told him sooner that he loved him.

Sudden movement from the corner of his eye stopped Will from spiraling any further.

He looked over just enough to see that one of Dmitri's men was leaning heavily against the doorway between the kitchen and the sitting room, a glass in each hand. As Will watched, the man passed one of the tumblers to Boris and raised the other to his own lips, downing the clear liquid inside in a single swallow.

"Skol'ko yeshche?" He asked, and though Will didn't know what he was saying, he could tell the foreign words were slurred.

"Nemnogo." Boris answered, putting his cigarette out on the leather arm of his chair before taking a deep gulp of his drink. "Poterpi."

Whatever the other man said next was far too long for Will to make any sense of, but it sounded whiny, petulant, and when he gestured toward Will, he couldn't help but stiffen slightly - perhaps the specifics of the conversation were lost on him, but he could at least guess what they were talking about, and he doubted it was anything good.

And when the man reached behind himself and pulled Hannibal's favorite chef's knife from his pants, Will felt his blood run cold, his suspicions confirmed.

The man grinned widely, pointing the knife at Will and slicing enthusiastically through the air between them as he spoke.

"Net." Boris snapped as he swallowed the last of his drink. "Dmitri skazal net."

The man answered in the same childish tone as he had before, and took a few stumbling steps closer to Will, the knife still outstretched before him.

"Alexei!" Boris barked. "Ne!"

The man - Alexei - called something back over his shoulder as he continued shakily forward. Will was rigid where he sat, pressed tight against the back of his chair when Alexei crouched down in front of him.

"Hmm?" The man grunted, holding the knife up for Will to see, as if the enormous blade had somehow escaped his notice. "Hmm?"

Will didn't answer him. His eyes flickered from the glinting knife in Alexei's fist, up his swaying body and settled on his ruddy face and unfocused eyes. The man was clearly drunk, but that fact did not reassure Will in the slightest.

If anything, it only made him more nervous. Alexei already had the upper hand on him, and now he was impaired, unpredictable, and likely unreasonable. And though Dmitri had given his word that Will wouldn't be harmed until Hannibal arrived, he had no way of knowing if he had any intention of keeping that promise, much less if his men cared at all about honoring the deal or not. He wasn't entirely sure what Alexei wanted, what he was doing, what he was planning, and it wasn't like Will could ask or even trust whatever answer he was told. But even if he could, it didn't matter - Alexei and the others were going to do whatever they were going to do and Will would have no choice but to endure it. And when Hannibal finally did come, he was going to die. There was no getting around that. If he wanted to survive his remaining time alive unscathed, the best thing he could do was keep quiet and try to convince his captors he wasn't worth their time or interest.

So Will remained unmoving where he sat, refusing to react as Alexei continued to wave the knife in front of him.

But Alexei, apparently, didn't appreciate being ignored. He frowned, drew the knife back slightly as he studied Will.

And then, without warning, he plunged it down again, the tip stopping only centimeters from Will's eye.

Will blinked reflexively at the sudden motion and nothing more.

Blood boiled under the surface of Alexei's flushed skin, his red face growing shockingly redder and redder as he drew even closer to Will, until their noses were just inches apart and Will could smell the vodka on his breath.

"Kakiye?" Was all Will got before Alexei unleashed a string of harsh-sounding, meaningless Russian, the last of which was spat over his shoulder at Boris, who was busy staring mournfully into his empty cup.

"Faggot." Boris told him, sounding bored.

As soon as he spoke, Alexei's head swiveled sharply on his shoulders back to Will. He was grinning wickedly.

"...Faggot." He whispered, testing the unfamiliar word. And then, louder and taunting and malicious, " *Faggot* ."

The only response Will gave was a slight clenching of his jaw, but apparently it was more than enough to encourage Alexei further. He brought the knife up and lightly touched it to Will's cheek, at the corner of his mouth.

"Faggot." He said again, dragging the knife lightly, suggestively, across Will's lips. Whatever he said next was entirely lost on Will, but he could guess it was something equally mocking and vicious. Will tried to pull away, careful to avoid the edge of the blade, but Alexei's arm shot out before he could get very far, holding him in place as he pressed the knife back against Will's lips, harder, deeper, until the skin split and Will tasted blood.

He gasped.

"Alexei! Etogo dostatochno!" Boris thundered, rising swiftly to his feet.

Alexei released Will's head so that he could turn and answer Boris, and the moment he was free, Will lunged, straining against the cuffs as he sank his teeth deep into Alexei's unguarded wrist. He bit down as hard as he could, until copper and salt welled under his tongue.

Alexei roared, yanking his arm back, and tearing a mouthful of flesh from himself as he did.

"Svoloch!" He screamed, dropping the knife to cradle his bleeding arm against his chest.

"What you do?!" Boris shouted, stomping over to them, and Will spat the bloody mass onto the floor between them. Boris stopped short, staring down at it with horror and disgust, and then slowly looked over at Alexei, as he continued to moan and clench his injured limb. For a moment, he seemed so stunned by what had happened that he didn't, or couldn't, speak.

He recovered fast enough.

He looked at Will, and Will stared defiantly back, watching his expression slowly darken.

Then he seized Will by the throat.

"I will kill you!" He hissed through his teeth, grabbing his gun from his hip with his free hand and shoving it between Will's eyes. "You fucker! I will kill you!"

Will choked, struggling weakly against his hold, his vision beginning to tunnel -

"Boris! Put him down!"

Immediately, the iron grip loosened, and Will sputtered and coughed, sucking air into his begging lungs. When he could finally breathe properly again, he raised his head to see that Dmitri was standing just a few feet away, his men gathered behind him in the door. Will panted, eyeing him warily.

Dmitri's pale gaze roved from Will's shaking form, the blood smeared over his mouth, to Alexei's hunched over one, the blood dripping down his arm. He cocked a single eyebrow.

"Problem, gentlemen?" He asked sarcastically.

Will opened his mouth, but before he could reply, Boris interjected.

"He bite Alexei!" He howled, pointing an accusing finger at Will and the blood on his chin. "He bite him!"

"Hmm." Dmitri hummed, nudging the abandoned chef's knife on the floor with his foot. "Not without good reason, I'm sure. What were you two doing to him?"

"We do nothing!"

"Liar!" Will snarled, spitting flecks of blood. "He was threatening me-"

"Be quiet, Mr. Graham." Dmitri said calmly, eyes still fixed on Boris. "I'll get to you in a moment. Well, Boris? Is that true? You were threatening Mr. Graham?"

Boris hesitated, shuffling his feet. "Alexei not really do anything." He said at last. "He want…scare him, is all."

Dmitri exhaled slowly through his nose. "I thought I said," He drawled, "That Mr. Graham was not to be touched until Lecter arrived."

"We did not-"

“You approached him with a knife.” Dmitri pointed out coldly. “While Mr. Graham was tied to a chair. What did you expect him to do?”

“He *bite* -”

“Yes, I know he bit Alexei.” Dmitri said over him, sounding impatient for the first time since he’d stepped into the room. “I’ll deal with him in a minute. But you knew damn well what he was when you decided to provoke him. You have no one to blame but yourselves for what happened.”

“But -”

“Boris!” Dmitri boomed. “I suggest you think very carefully about what you’re going to say to me next before you say it!”

Boris’s open mouth worked silently for a few seconds as he considered Dmitri’s words, and then eventually closed. His lips were white with rage as he stepped silently back, pulling the groaning Alexei with him. Dmitri watched them go, his eyes like hard chips of ice and his mouth set in a rigid line. When he finally turned his attention back to Will, he wished he hadn’t. His face was cruel. It promised pain.

“I apologize for the way my men treated you, Mr. Graham.” He said. “I assure you, I meant it when I promised Lecter you would not be hurt.”

Will swallowed. “...It’s fine.” He muttered hesitantly. “Just keep them away from me.”

“Of course.” Dmitri said, inclining his head. “I appreciate your understanding.” He paused then, and in that brief instant, Will was struck by just how much he reminded him of Hannibal. He wondered, if circumstances were different, whether the two of them could have been friends (or as close to friends as two people like them could be).

Will doubted it.

It was far more likely that the two of them would tear each other apart the first chance they got.

Will's musings were cut short when Dmitri suddenly thrust his face just a few inches from his own. Will startled, eyes darting frantically back and forth across his blank expression, trying to figure out what he was doing, what he was thinking.

"But, of course," Dmitri continued, voice low. "I can't allow you to go unpunished for what you did. After all, what kind of example would I be setting for my men?"

By the time Will had pieced together what he was saying, what he meant, Dmitri had already grabbed his chair. Will jerked back, trying to get away despite knowing he couldn't, as Dmitri tipped it over, sending him crashing to the ground.

Will was helpless to stop his head from smacking against the hardwood floor, and he gasped at the agony that followed. It began just above his ear, right at the point of contact, and radiated back, where it exploded in a white hot burst and then smoldered along a thin, excruciating line.

'Fracture.' He found himself thinking dazedly, feverishly, remembering that that spot was where Boris had hit him earlier in the bar. 'There's a crack in my skull.'

It seemed to take a long time for the pain to fade into something smaller and easier to ignore, for the high-pitched ringing in his ears to die down and for the world to finally stop spinning. When it did, Will weakly spat out a mouthful of burning bile, which dribbled down his cheek onto the floor. He coughed, wanting nothing more than to curl protectively around himself, as the Russians laughed and jeered at him from across the room. Above him, Dmitri smirked.

"Don't worry, Mr. Graham." He said, all fake sympathy and mocking smiles. "Lecter will be here for you soon enough. And then all your suffering will finally be over." He paused. "But...we still have a bit of time together before he arrives. So I suggest you behave for us until he does. You don't want to make this any harder on yourself than it already has to be, do you?"

Will refused to answer as Dmitri turned and walked away. As he passed the floor lamp, the only source of light in the sitting room, he pushed it over. Will jerked as it crashed to the floor, the lightbulb shattering instantly on impact and plunging the room in darkness. Will kept his eyes firmly closed, his head tucked down, as shards of glass went flying. He panted, listening to the Russians as they filed out of the room and back into the kitchen, leaving him alone in the dark, bits of glass scattered around him, his beard caked with drying vomit, his head throbbing. Will felt his jaw spasm, and quickly bit his lip, swallowing down a sob.

This wasn't how he thought he'd go.

He had always suspected that he'd die young. Between his job and his empathy disorder, he had figured that he wouldn't last long enough to see old age. And he had made his peace with that. It was just that...

He had always thought it would be something quick, and violent. That he'd die fighting or at least on his own terms. Not like this. Not tied to a chair, beaten and humiliated and alone.

No.

It was supposed to be with Hannibal. By his side, or by his hand, one way or another, Will had come to believe over the years that one day, he would die with Hannibal.

He felt a single stubborn tear slip down his face.

Hannibal.

He wanted Hannibal.

Just for him to be there with him, for Hannibal to be the last thing that he saw before he died. So that he could tell him he was sorry. To tell him one last time that he loved him. But more

than anything, he wanted Hannibal to pull him into his arms, whisper sweet nothings and stroke his hair as Will's life was savagely ripped from his broken body.

Because Will wasn't so delusional that he believed Hannibal was going to be able to swoop in and save him. Not this time. And he was fine with that. In a way, it seemed fitting.

But how was he supposed to do this alone? Just how much longer was he supposed to wait? Didn't Hannibal know he needed him? That every moment without him was torture? That every minute he wasn't there was another minute the two of them wouldn't have together? What was taking him so long?

Will wasn't sure how long he lay there, suspended in the darkness and listening to the distant sounds of laughter from the other room and wishing that Hannibal was there with him, when the air suddenly grew cold. Will shivered, and hesitantly cracked an eye. What was happening? Why was it so cold? Had someone opened the window?

No. It was still closed, the world beyond still eerily black. Everything was still the same as it had been before. Nothing had changed. So then what…

There was movement in his periphery. Just enough for him to notice it, but too far outside his field of vision for him to get a good look at whatever it was. Will craned his head as far as he could, his heart hammering anxiously in his chest, convinced that Boris or Alexei had snuck back into the room to hurt him again, when he caught sight of something white and billowing, something edging toward him from the shadows.

His breath caught, transfixed by what he saw.

Her dress hung like mist around her bare feet as she crept slowly closer and closer. Her skin shone like polished alabaster by the distant light of the kitchen. Her long, dark hair was no longer lank and tangled, hanging in her face, but soft and shiny, the curls strung with pearls and pulled into an elegant knot at the back of her head. She looked beautiful and… *whole* in a way she had never looked before. Will watched her as she moved carefully, deliberately closer.

She waited until she was just a few feet away from him before she finally spoke.

“It never seemed fair to me. That the only certainty of living was its end. I struggled with that for years, knowing I had an entire lifetime ahead of me and no idea how I was supposed to live it. There was so much I didn’t know. So much I didn’t understand then that I understand now. It’s funny - it all becomes so clear only once it’s over. It’s only then that you have all the answers you’ve spent your whole life fumbling for. It’s enough to drive a person crazy.”

She stopped in front of him. Crouched down on her knees, just inches away. Close enough for Will to touch, if he were able. He stared up at her, his chest heaving and eyes wide, hardly daring to believe that he was seeing her again - it felt like so much time had passed since the last time he had seen her, despite the fact that it hadn’t been that long ago at all.

Seeing her again now, Will realized he was seeing her clearly for the first time.

She tilted her head, her dark blue eyes locked on his, studying him, and it occurred to Will that maybe she was seeing him clearly for the first time too.

She smiled at him.

“I’m going to tell you something now that I wish someone had told me when I was still alive.” She said. “It would have helped me, I think, if I just had known this one thing.” She paused, her smile softening slightly. It was a reassuring thing, her smile, a small, gentle curve of her lips. Nothing like the too-wide, deranged grin he had seen so many times before. “It’s about balance. That’s the secret: everything in moderation. Too much of anything, or too little, and it all just falls apart.”

She sighed then. Shifted a little.

“You were always so afraid you’d end up just like me.” She continued, her small smile turning regretful. “Too much dopamine, too many receptors, too much perception. Not enough time. Certainly not enough faith…You were so scared for so long. You spent nearly your whole life being scared. Of me. Of yourself. There was so much that you lost, just from being scared.”

Her lip trembled and inverted.

“I’m so sorry.” She whispered. “I never wanted that for you. Dear heart, you were born for better things than to live each day in fear - to crawl and cower when you were always meant to fly. I wish I could have told you that sooner...”

Will swallowed, his throat painfully tight.

“...It doesn’t matter.” He croaked, shaking his head. “You’re not real. And even if you were, it’s not like I have any chance of getting out of here alive. So what’s the point of having regrets now-”

“What do you mean?” She asked him, patient and indulging, and the way she said it made Will feel like a child, as if she were merely humoring him, as if his fears and concerns were completely unfounded, unreasonable - monsters under his bed. “Who says you don’t?”

“Look at me.” Will said tonelessly, nodding at his bound body, still tied to the tipped-over chair. “How am I supposed to get out of this?” He asked, rattling his cuffs. “How am I supposed to take on eight armed men alone? It’s impossible.”

She clicked her tongue at him.

“Nothing,” she emphasized, “Is impossible.” And when Will scoffed at her, she insisted, “It’s not. Darling, haven’t you realized yet why Hannibal has always gotten away with as much as he has?”

Confused now, wondering what she was talking about, where she was going with it, Will shook his head.

"...Whimsy." She explained in a whisper, a secret between the two of them. "Optimism. Hannibal has always been able to do everything he's ever done simply because he believed he could, no matter how unlikely it was. He doesn't concern himself with whether or not it might work, whether he might get caught or not. He doesn't even consider the possibility that he might fail."

She beamed at him.

"Don't you see? It's a balance. Too much madness and reality escapes you. You get lost. But too much reality and you have no room for possibility. It paralyzes you." She leaned closer to him. "It's true that insanity isn't a good thing. But If you want to survive in this world," She said, her face now inches from his, "All you need…is just a touch."

Her lips brushed against his forehead, and even though Will knew she wasn't real, he swore he felt it.

He shivered as she pulled away.

She sat back on her heels, looking at him.

"You have everything you need to make it out of this," She told him, "To save yourself. To save Hannibal. To live the life you were always meant to have. You just have to be brave enough to believe it."

"Mama-" Will began shakily, but she quickly hushed him.

"Shh. None of that now, dearest. I know you can do it." She smiled at him again, and it was the kind of smile he had always imagined she might give him, if things had been different. A look he had always wanted, always needed, and could never have - a look of love, a mother's adoration. Will closed his eyes, overwhelmed, as she continued.

"Never forget," He heard her murmur, "That in my own way, I've *always* loved you."

There was something startlingly final about those words, and Will's eyes flew open, desperate to see her one last time before she disappeared, but he was too late.

She was already gone.

Will blinked and looked around the empty room, at the long shadows cast from the faraway kitchen lights, the sitting room window and the black void beyond, glancing from the shards of the broken lightbulb to Hannibal's chef's knife still lying where Alexei had dropped it.

He was completely and utterly and undeniably alone.

It was jarring how alone he was.

' *It felt so real.* ' He found himself thinking feverishly. ' *Was she…* '

No. No, of course she hadn't actually been there. He had a concussion and a fractured skull and a family history of mental illness. And even with his head injury and bad genes, Will knew that what he had just seen was not real. That what he had heard was just plain crazy. There was no way he could escape this. No way he could fight Dmitri's men and win. No way he could save himself and Hannibal from this.

To even try would be-

The sound of glass smashing for the fourth time that night, and the Russians howling with laughter immediately after, stopped the thought dead in its tracks. As Will hung there helplessly, listening, he felt a rage unlike any he had ever felt before bubble up inside him.

How dare they…

How *dare* they…

How dare these people come barging into his life, demanding justice and retribution and compensation for a man who had preyed upon children. How dare they beat him, threaten him. How dare they disrespect Hannibal, break beautiful things for no better reason than the simple fact that they could. How dare they drag Ronny into this…

…and Nadine…

Will's fury boiled, peaked, then gradually faded until it died, leaving a strange, cool clarity in its wake.

He looked back at the knife lying just inches away from him. Glanced back to the empty doorway to the kitchen, the halo of golden light and buzzing voices beyond his sight.

He was alone. Unsupervised. The Russians were all gathered together in the kitchen. The front door was unguarded just a few feet away. There was a knife within reach, if only he could reach it.

An idea stirred, the beginnings of a plan taking shape.

It was stupid plan. Reckless. And dangerous. And the chance of it working was almost impossible.

Almost.

But…maybe not entirely.

Will shifted slightly in his seat. His arms, still looped around behind the chair, his hands still tightly cuffed, twinged painfully, the muscles stiff, the blood flow reduced to a trickle. With some difficulty, Will managed to move his left hand into his right. He grabbed his thumb.

And then he yanked it back.

—-------

With his thumb broken, it was easy to slip the cuffs.

And with his hands free, there was nothing to keep Will tied to the chair.

He pulled his arms back slowly, biting back a groan as the blood began to flow normally again. His fingers were numb, and Will flexed his hands a few times before rolling off the chair, wincing, freezing, when the floorboard underneath him creaked loudly, shattering the silence that had hung so heavily in the room for so long. He waited, holding his breath, certain that the Russians must have heard it - how could they not? - but after a minute had passed and nothing changed, when there wasn't so much as a pause in their conversation, Will grabbed the chef's knife at his feet and tucked it into his jeans. Crouched low to the ground, he crept slowly around the sofa, careful to avoid the bits of glass strewn over the floor, stopping occasionally when one of the men in the room beyond would grow suddenly louder, more boisterous, than before. His heart hammered as he moved, his palms slick with sweat. A few times he slipped, a few times his hands or knees landed on a piece of glass he hadn't seen, and it crunched loudly as it crumbled, slivers burrowing deep into his flesh.

Will bit his lip. Ignored the pain. Kept going.

It seemed to take him forever to reach the front entry hall. When he did, Will glanced over his shoulder, back toward the golden glow of the kitchen and the men gathered there that he couldn't see but could still hear. Slowly, Will rose to his feet. Crossed the short distance to the front door. The handle was soothingly cool when he grabbed it.

It was as he was slowly pulling the door open that Will heard Dmitri's voice rise above the rest. "Boris, idi prover' Graham."

When he heard his name, Will felt his blood run cold.

His head whipped back around again when he heard the scraping of a chair being pushed back, the sound of heavy footsteps coming closer and closer…

Will scrambled outside, not bothering to close the door behind him as he leapt over the front porch railing and took off running through the fields to the detached garage.

It was even darker outside than it had appeared to be from inside, the only light for miles coming from the kitchen at the back of the house. Faint as it was, it was still just enough for Will to make out the whitewashed building looming in the distance. But even without the light, Will would have been able to make it to the garage just fine - he had walked these fields so many times over the past few months that he knew them now by heart, every inch like the back of his own hand - it was a hundred flat feet between the house and the garage. Practically nothing. Just a hundred feet. He could do that. He could reach it before Dmitri and the others had even realized he was gone.

He was about halfway there when the stillness suddenly imploded, a great uproar echoing from the house behind him. Startled, Will skidded to an abrupt halt, turning in time to see every light in the house flip on, backlit, shadowy figures racing between windows-

And then the door flew open with a bang.

“GRAAAHHHAAAM!”

Will jerked back, nearly tripping over his own feet as he bolted for the garage. He could hear them shouting behind him, their feet pounding against the wooden porch steps as they came thundering down from the house. Will didn’t dare look back again as he slipped inside the garage, pulling the door shut firmly behind him.

It was pitch black inside. Will couldn’t see more than an inch or two in front of his face as he staggered forward, his hands outstretched, his fingers skimming the rough interior, trying to orient himself.

He was sure that they had heard him. That they had seen him. That they'd be coming for him any second now.

He needed to hurry.

Leaning heavily against the wall, Will shuffled to the back of the garage, where he had left the sledgehammer last. Distantly, he could hear the Russians calling for him, their voices incredibly loud in the still and quiet night. Even if they somehow hadn't seen him before, there was only so much time before one of them discovered the garage and checked inside. And one of those voices sounded much closer than the others…

Will heaved a sigh of relief when he finally brushed against the smooth wood of the sledgehammer's handle. He hissed as he lifted it up, the weight of the hammer pushing the slivers of glass embedded in his palms even deeper, but he didn't dare drop it or even adjust his grip - he couldn't afford to. Not when -

Will froze as a shadow fell over the little window of the garage door.

"Graham!" Called a singsong voice on the other side, a hand coming up to tap the glass. "Graaaahhhhaaaamm!"

Heart in his throat, Will pressed himself flat against the far corner of the garage as the doorknob rattled, turned. He held his breath when the door slowly swung open…

Will could just barely make out the dark figure standing in the doorway before him. He couldn't see well enough to say for sure who it was, but the voice was unfamiliar to him, and the man was short - much shorter than Boris, shorter than Dmitri, even shorter than Will. He watched the man as he shifted from one foot to the other, his head swiveling first to the right and then to the left.

' *He can't see me* .' Will realized. ' *I'm too far back. It's too dark. He doesn't know for sure I'm here.* '

Muttering what sounded like a curse, the man took a small, hesitant step inside the garage.

‘ *Come on* .’ Will urged him silently, tightening his hold on the sledgehammer. ‘ *Just a little closer. Come on…* ’

The man obliged, taking another few blind steps further in. Still too far away for Will to reach, but if he would just take another step, just one more step...

Will shifted slightly, raising the hammer higher, ready to bring it down if he had to, and felt his stomach drop when he misjudged the weight, the distance between himself and the wall, and the metal head raked loudly over the concrete wall behind him.

The man’s head turned sharply on his shoulders, rotating toward the sound, toward Will.

For a moment, neither Will nor the Russian moved.

And then, with a shout, the man rushed forward, charging straight for Will -

Will swung with everything he had.

There was a sickening crunch as the hammer collided with his skull, and Will felt the bone give way beneath it instantly. The man crumpled to the ground, like a puppet whose strings had been cut, but Will didn’t stop there. He brought the hammer down again...again...and again as warm, wet blood spattered across his hands, his clothes, his face, until the only resistance Will met with was the soft, wet squelch of pulp. Panting, he dropped the hammer at last, ignoring the loud clang that followed, the echo that rang through the garage and out into the night. Will stumbled back, exhausted, slipping on blood and only-God-knew-what-else before he collapsed against the cold wall of the garage, panting.

He could have fallen asleep right there, tucked between the unforgiving concrete and the mangled remains of a corpse, if not for the eerie, unnatural hush that had fallen so heavily over the world. Will was sure that the others had heard everything, the struggle, the startled cry of their friend cut short, the blows of the hammer as it pounded bone to dust….that if they didn't before, they knew exactly where he was now, and that as soon as they recovered from the shock and horror of what they just heard, they'd be there within moments.

He couldn't stay. He couldn't defend himself against seven other men, even with a hammer, backed into a corner.

He had to keep going.

Reluctantly, Will dragged himself away, back to the door, and cautiously peered outside. He couldn't see much beside the house, but he knew Dmitri and the others were out there, lurking just beyond his sight. Will turned his head in the direction of the road.

As much as he wanted to, Will knew it was too great a risk to try going back that way. Not when he'd have to pass the house to reach the road, not when he was sure Dmitri had been smart enough to dispatch one of his men to stand guard by the driveway, ready to grab him, or at least alert the others if he was seen. And even if he hadn't, even if by some miracle Will managed to slip by unnoticed and make it to the road, to get away, they could easily overtake him once they realized where he'd gone. Not to mention, Will wasn't sure which way Hannibal was coming from, so he had no guarantee of intercepting him before he arrived.

Will bit back a groan of frustration. If he couldn't make it to the road, then what was he supposed to do?

A light breeze stirred the grass, the blades brushing gently against Will's face as he sat there, thinking, wondering what to do, where to go…

The answer came to him a minute later.

It started low, a faint rumble that Will had heard so many times before that he barely even registered the sound at first. It wasn't until the Russians began to murmur nervously, calling

out to one another in the dark, when he heard the fear and uncertainty in their voices, that Will finally noticed the strange noise, realized what it meant.

He rose slowly to his feet, turning away from the road...

…Toward the lake.

For a moment, Will stood still, listening to the sound of his own ragged breathing and the strange, vibrating roar that seemed to come from everywhere all at once.

‘ *He’s close* .’ He thought, closing his eyes. ‘ *Really close. If I could just figure out where…* ’

He listened for a moment, cocking his head, trying to pinpoint where exactly the sound was coming from. But between the darkness and the echo that followed, it was hard to say for sure.

Will bit his lip, straining to hear.

The rumble died down. The silence that followed seemed unbelievably loud in comparison. Will held his breath, waiting, terrified he had missed his only chance...

It started up again a few moments later. And it was in that brief instant between when it began and the reverberation that wasn’t far behind that Will caught it, that he knew exactly where it was.

His eyes snapped open, and Will stood unmoving, staring out into the vast night ahead of him, his muscles tightly coiled with anticipation, abused fingers tingling with adrenaline. Was he really going to do this?

‘ *This is insane.’* A little voice whispered in the back of his head. ‘ *This is hands-down the stupidest thing you’ve ever done. There’s no way this is going to work. Not even Hannibal*

would be crazy enough to try this.'

No. Probably not.

But he wasn't Hannibal - he was so much worse.

And as crazy as his idea was, it was all he had.

And it was better than nothing.

So before he could convince himself otherwise, Will ran.

He could barely see, but it didn't bother him. He didn't need to see. He knew exactly where he was going. He tore through the fields, running faster than he had ever run in his life, arms, legs, and heart pumping furiously. Grass and reeds slapped his thighs, cutting across his arms. The cool black air whipped through his hair and stung his eyes. The ground rolled under him, no longer the smooth expanse between the house and the garage but the wild undulations of the marsh. A few times he stumbled, a few times his ankle rolled painfully in its socket, a few times Will was nearly sent crashing down to earth...

But he didn't stop.

And he wasn't quiet. Far from it - he was offensively loud, impossible not to hear.

But that was fine.

He wanted to be heard.

...I'm a good fisherman, Jack..

...It's the same thing isn't it? One you stalk, the other you lure…

...Come on…this way.. . this way … over here…

Will felt a familiar thrill when he heard them behind him - running, yelling, fumbling, falling in the dark - but it quickly turned to terror when he realized just how close they were.

Too close - if he had any hope of pulling this off, he needed more time, more distance, between them. Because one wrong move and it was over, they'd be on him in seconds and then he'd be back in Dmitri's hands, and he could only imagine what Dmitri would do to him, how he would punish him if he caught him again…

He kept going, forcing himself to go faster.

It was a subtle change from dirt to silt to sand, but Will had been anticipating it, and as soon as he felt the difference, he slowed, bracing himself. And when his foot struck water, not earth, mud sucking him down, he wasn't surprised, he didn't fall. He continued on, deeper, father, kicking, splashing, violently stirring the water as much as he could as he went.

"Come on, you ugly bastard." He muttered, moving down along the shore. He could see the dark shape of his dock rising from the shadows ahead. "I'm right here. I'm right here - come and get me."

But by that time, the air was so filled with shouts of angry Russian, the symphony of pounding feet chasing after him through the darkness, that there was little room for anything else to be heard, much less Will's quiet mumbling. The world had become a confusing, meaningless jumble of sounds, difficult, if not impossible, to understand and interpret. In fact, it was only when the noise abruptly stopped that Will was able to make sense of what was happening, that he knew they had reached the shore.

Will glanced over his shoulder. It was too dark, he was too far, to see them, what exactly they were doing, but he could imagine them gathered at the water's edge, pacing back and forth,

surprised to find themselves at the edge of a lake and wondering what to do, if they dared to go any further.

Will continued noisily on, water sloshing loudly around him as he slapped and kicked, taunting them, encouraging them to follow.

‘ *Come on, come on* .’ He thought, cutting as fast as he could through the chilly water. ‘ *What are you waiting for?! I’m right here!* ’

He breathed a small sigh of relief when they finally took the bait and plunged in after him, cursing the wet and the cold, the thick tangles of reeds and sweet flag that dragged along the shallows, but they didn’t stop, following after Will as he led them further down, deeper in.

Will was a little surprised by just how fast they were moving. Between the fact that they had the water to weigh them down and that they couldn’t see more than a few feet in front of them, he thought they would have gone more slowly, more cautiously.

He couldn’t have been more wrong.

They came charging after him like a pack of rabid bloodhounds on a scent, leaping and clamoring and frantic to reach him, the water heaving forcefully as they rushed after him, waves crashing against Will, sweeping over him, upsetting his balance and footing and threatening to pull him under. Will could feel his panic mounting as they continued to edge closer and closer, gaining on him.

“Faggot!” A voice Will knew, Alexei’s voice, called out suddenly from the darkness, a startling few feet behind him. “You fucking faggot!”

Truly terrified now, now that he knew there was so little space separating him from recapture, Will pressed on, fighting desperately against the churning, heavy water as it whirled around him, trying to drag him down. His legs burned, his lungs screamed, but he didn’t stop. The pier was just a few feet away now, right there, he was so close now he could reach out and touch it -

But before he could, a hand grabbed the back of his collar and yanked him back, pulling him down below the surface of the lake. Water filled his mouth and nose, and Will thrashed, twisting, kicking, clawing wildly, but no matter how hard he fought, he couldn't break free, and the more he struggled, the more his lungs burned, begging for air. He jerked, hard as he could, trying to throw the hold on him off, but instead, it only tightened.

Will was panicking - he needed air, he couldn't see, could barely tell which way was up and which was down, head was killing him, he could feel himself growing faint, his movements slowing. Oh, God, he was going to pass out, he was going to -

Will was right on the edge of consciousness when he was hauled back up again, sputtering and choking.

"Suka!" Alexei's voice shrieked hatefully in his ear, shaking Will roughly. He gasped, batted weakly at the hands wrapped crushingly tight around his arm, fisting his jacket. "Ty grebanaya suka! Ya ub'yu tebya!"

"Let go of me!" Will managed, writhing frantically as he felt the man begin to haul him back, back toward the shore, away from the dock. "Get off!"

"Ostanovka!" Alexei snapped, jostling him again. "Mne bylo dostatcho-"

Something strange happened then.

There was a powerful surge of movement from under the water, and Alexei stumbled back, as if something had knocked into him and thrown him off balance. A brief pause, a moment of confusion, and then Alexei was wrenched suddenly, violently, away from Will, pulled with such force that the sickening, unmistakable *crunch* of snapping bones soon followed. Alexei screamed, a bloodcurdling, haunting thing that burst from his throat and filled the waiting air, impossibly, horrifyingly loud before he disappeared beneath the lake, silencing him instantly.

The water bubbled ominously in his wake, suspiciously warm and thick.

Will scrambled away, clambering for the dock, fingers scraping, nails splintering, against the rough wood as he hauled himself up out of the water. He collapsed against the wood sopping wet, panting, trying to catch his breath as the water continued to roil below him, hardly daring to believe his luck.

It worked. It had actually worked. He couldn't believe it worked.

Well.

He was pretty sure it worked - if Alexei wasn't dead yet, he would be soon. There was only so much blood a person could lose, so much damage the body could take, and an alligator could do a lot of damage.

Will smiled to himself.

Two down.

Six to go.

God, he was tired.

So, so tired…

He didn't even realize he had begun to drift off until it was too late.

They came out of nowhere, grabbing Will and hauling him to his feet before he even realized what was happening, their hands snatching at whatever they could reach, tugging, scratching, pinching, yanking, voices shouting. Will snarled, bucking and twisting in their grasp, and managed to pull one arm free. He seized the chef's knife he'd stashed in his pants and whipped it out, slashing, stabbing, fighting blind.

He was shocked by just how *hard* it hit when he finally struck a body, how easily it sank, how viciously it tore, opening a geyser of hot blood that sprayed over them all and spilled out onto the dock. One of the men holding Will released him with a loud, wet gurgle, and he staggered back, clutching at his throat. Will and the others watched, stunned, horrified, as he collapsed at their feet, and it was only once he finally stopped twitching and went eerily still that the spell broke and the shock wore off.

The Russians descended on Will with the fury of hell, pulling him down, pinning him in place. Will fought just as viciously back as the knife was torn from his hand, spitting and cursing and biting.

He only stopped when someone had the sense to grab his head and slam it back down against the pier.

White stars burst across his vision, and Will instantly went limp, too stunned to move, much less even think about it, as the men slowly released him, muttering to one another. One grabbed his legs. Two others took his shoulders. Will blinked as he was lifted up, trying to clear the black spots growing across his vision, but the darkness swallowed him up as he was swiftly borne away.

Will came to as they were taking him into the house.

The lights seemed so bright after he had spent so long in the dark, and he squinted up at them as he was carried over the threshold and into the sitting room, where Dmitri was waiting for him, draped across one of the armchairs with a glass of whiskey in hand. He didn't so much as spare Will a glance as he was brought over and dropped to the ground at his feet, despite the fact that it knocked the air from Will's lungs and he gasped loudly, struggling for breath.

"You've been a thorn in my side ever since I first heard your name, Mr. Graham." He said, casually swirling his drink before taking a long swallow of the amber liquid.

“S-sorry.” Will wheezed sarcastically. “But to be fair, I could say the same about you.”

Dmitri ignored him.

Instead, he turned and looked over at the men scattered around the room, his eyes roving slowly from one to the other.

Counting them.

“Where are the others?” He asked after a moment. He sounded impatient, frustrated, as if suspected that his missing men had abandoned the search for Will and were slacking off somewhere.

If only that were true.

A beat of awkward silence passed as his remaining men exchanged nervous glances.

“Dead.” Boris said eventually, his voice quaking with anger. He was the closest one to Dmitri, the only one brave enough (or stupid enough…or maybe just plain hateful enough) to remain right where he had been when he dumped Will on the ground. The others had retreated further back, away. “They all dead.”

“What?” Dmitri snapped at him, eyes flashing dangerously. “How?!”

“Him.” Boris explained, nodding tightly down at Will. “He kill them.”

“You’re telling me,” Dmitri drawled with clear disbelief, “That he managed to kill three of you before you could stop him?”

“No.” Boris said, shaking his head. “He stab Sergei when we grab him. He kill Alexei and Ivan before that. We not know how. We not see…we just hear the screaming.”

Dmitri considered these words for a moment before he turned to Will.

“Is that true, Mr. Graham?” He asked him quietly. “You killed them?”

Will panted and couldn’t help the small smile that curled upon his lips.

“Technically,” He said, “I didn’t kill Alexei. The alligator did.”

A look of complete shock flashed briefly over Dmitri’s face at his words before he managed to school his features again. “Is that so?” He murmured. Then he exhaled a long, deep sigh. “Boris.”

That he could convey so much with so little seemed impossible, but apparently he could, because Boris reacted immediately.

Without a word, he raised his foot a few feet off the ground. He hesitated a moment, just long enough for Will to realize what he was about to do, and then he brought it back down as hard as he could.

Directly over Will’s ribs.

Will felt it as his ribs bent, cracked, and snapped under Boris’ weight, and a strangled cry erupted from him as the air was forcibly pushed out of his lungs.

Above him, Dmitri swallowed the rest of his drink.

“I told you, Mr. Graham.” He said, setting the empty glass down and slowly rising to his feet. “I warned you that there would be consequences if you didn’t behave yourself. Really, you have only yourself to blame.”

He took a couple leisurely steps closer to Will, who continued to convulse where he lay, trying to draw breath. Will watched from the corner of his eye as he knelt down beside him.

“We still have a few minutes before Lecter’s supposed to arrive.” Dmitri told him, taking the revolver at his hip and cocking it. “Not much time, but more than enough for you to still cause trouble, I think. Now, the last thing I want is to do anything drastic, but I will if I have to.” With his gun in one hand, Dmitri reached out and cupped Will’s cheek, his thumb stroking back and forth over his scar. “So tell me, Will: are you going to cooperate for me? Or not?”

Will couldn’t answer him even if he wanted to - he could barely breathe, much less speak, and just the thought of it was agony.

But even if he could, he wouldn’t.

Rather than give Dmitri what he wanted, Will jerked his head away with a silent snarl, twisted as far away from the man as he could.

Dmitri sighed.

“Very well, Mr. Graham.” He said. “I really didn’t want it to come to this, you know. But I’m afraid you’ve left me no choice.”

But Will was barely listening to him. Because as soon as he turned his head, he had caught sight of something under the couch, less than a foot away. He squinted, trying to see it better, his heart beating wildly, excitedly, when he realized what it was.

Chiyoh’s gun.

The gun Hannibal had taken from him the day Will confronted him. The one that had been missing ever since.

It was right there.

If he could just-

Before he could even try to grab it, Will felt the cold muzzle of Dmitri’s revolver against his thigh.

“Just remember, Will. This was your choice.”

He fired.

There was a split second that Will didn’t feel anything.

And then it hit him - the familiar, burning pain of a bullet tearing through flesh.

Will screamed, every muscle seizing, warm blood gushing from the gaping hole in his leg.

There was so much blood.

Too much.

‘ *Oh, God.* ’ He found himself thinking wildly as the blood began to pool under him. ‘ *Did he hit an artery? Why is there so much?* ’

He barely even noticed when Dmitri leaned down to whisper in his ear. “Let’s try this again.” He said, pressing his hand over Will’s injured thigh. “Are you going to behave?”

Will whimpered, struggling weakly, and Dmitri’s grip tightened. “Hmm?” He urged him, ignoring Will when he began to sob. “Think carefully now, Mr. Graham. Lecter should be here in five minutes. There’s a lot I can do to you in that time. What’s it gonna be?”

“Hannibal!” Will called out desperately, eyes screwed tightly shut, tears streaming down his temples and into his hair. “Hannibal, please!”

“Scream as loud as you want. He can’t hear you. And even if he could, he can’t save you.”

“Hannibal!” Will wailed, his voice drowning out the Russians as they roared with laughter. “HANNIBAL!”

“What,” A loud, clear voice suddenly rang out from the chaos, “Are you doing?!”

He did not shout it, but he spoke with such cold fury, such power, that the room instantly fell silent, and every head turned slowly, disbelievingly, toward him.

Will gave a small cry of joy at the sight.

Hannibal was standing in the doorway, scowling. “Do you want to explain to me,” He growled, glaring at Dmitri. “What’s happening?”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all so much for your patience. I know it's been a while since I've updated, but hopefully it was worth the wait.

There is ONE chapter left. I have no idea how long it will be before it's posted, but hopefully it won't take me as long as it took me to write this one.

Translations (provided by Google, which is always 1000% correct):
"Skol'ko yeshche" = how much longer
"Nemnogo. Poterpi." = not long. be patient
"Net. Dmitri skazal net" = No. Dmitri said no
"Ne" = don't
"Kakiye" = what
"Togo dostatochno" = that's enough
"Svoloch" = bastard
"Suka. Ty grebanaya suka! Ya ub'yu tebya." = Bitch. You fucking bitch. I'll kill you.
"Ostanovka. Men bylo dostatochno" = shut up. I've had enough of you

And That's When My Love Was Burning (Yeah, It's Still Burning)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Do you want to explain to me,” Hannibal growled, his face contorted hideously, “Just what the hell you’re doing?”

From where he still crouched threateningly over Will, Dmitri stiffened, his eyes narrowing slightly, hatefully, as he studied Hannibal, considering his options.

A few moments passed before he finally spoke.

“Dr. Lecter.” He said at last, attempting to be gracious as he rose slowly to his feet and stepped over Will’s panting, bleeding form. “I’m so glad you could finally join us-”

“I seem to recall,” Hannibal interrupted him, his tone chilly. “You promised that Will would not be harmed while you were waiting for me.”

Dmitri hesitated. “Yes.” He admitted reluctantly, glancing over his shoulder back at Will. “I apologize for that. It was never my intention-”

“Of keeping your word?” Hannibal snapped, baring his teeth, and Dmitri faltered.

“...There were…complications.” He managed. “Things I couldn’t have possibly foreseen when I-”

“I wonder,” Hannibal said over him, “Just what kind of a man is one whose word means absolutely nothing? One who can’t manage even the simplest of his affairs when he has every advantage in his favor and offers nothing but excuses when he fails so utterly?” He cocked his head, maroon eyes fixed unblinkingly on Dmitri. “Not much of one at all, I would imagine. And certainly not one worth missing...”

One of the Russians, who was closer to Hannibal than the others, inched nervously away from him, and Dmitri seemed to shrink at his words, if only just a little. Compared to Hannibal, who looked like the Devil incarnate standing there so tall and strong, so undeniably commanding and beautiful, with his legs firmly planted apart and his chin slightly lowered, the shadows playing menacingly around his glaring eyes, he suddenly seemed much less impressive than he did a few minutes ago. And there was something about the sight of Dmitri intimidated, reduced to something small and weak and vulnerable by Hannibal, and so easily at that, especially on Will’s behalf after everything Dmitri had done to him, that Will couldn’t help but find deeply and immensely satisfying.

But as much as he enjoyed it, Will was beginning to feel lightheaded. Cold. Faint.

Like he was fading.

“H-Hannibal.” He whimpered then, and it was incredible just how fast Hannibal’s head turned from Dmitri toward him, how quickly his expression softened once his gaze met Will’s.

“Oh, Will.” He sighed, moving deeper into the room, closer to Will, and reaching him in just a few brisk steps. The Russians retreated even further back, watching uneasily as Hannibal dropped to his knees at Will’s side, his eyes moving from his split lip to his bent and bloodsoaked fingers, frowning at the ragged way he was breathing, the blood that was pooling so heavily underneath him.

He sighed again.

“I’m so sorry, mylimasis.” He murmured, cupping Will’s tear-soaked cheek in his hand. “They’ve hurt you terribly because of me, haven’t they?”

Will nodded tiredly, pressing himself closer to Hannibal, nuzzling against his hand, and whining when he began to pull away.

“No, please!” He cried, reaching up with shaking hands to keep Hannibal’s in place. “Please, just hold me! I don’t want to die without you-”

“You’re not going to die, Will.” Hannibal said firmly, prying his hand free from Will’s weak grasp and beginning to undo his belt. “I’m not going to let you. Remember?”

“But-”

“Shh. Enough of that now, sweetheart.” Hannibal scolded him as he looped the belt around Will’s thigh. Will cried out as he tied it tightly in place, and Hannibal clicked his tongue sympathetically. “Oh. I know, I know.” He cooed, brushing away a few stray tears that had gathered in Will’s eyelashes. “I’m sorry. It’ll all be over soon, I promise.”

Will sobbed and nodded quickly to show Hannibal he understood. “Make it quick.” He gasped. “Please, don’t drag it out. Don’t let me hurt anymore, please-”

“Will-”

“Please, can you do that for me?” Will begged him, panicking. “That’s all I want. Please, that’s all I’m asking, just this one thing-”

“Will, listen to me.” Hannibal said, leaning down to touch his forehead against Will’s. “You are not going to die. I’m going to get you out of here. I’m going to save you. You’re going to be alright. And then I’m going to take you away from here and I’m going to devote every day of the rest of my life to loving you. Do you understand?”

Will shook his head, eyes slipping shut, refusing to let himself believe there was any truth in what Hannibal was saying, any hope of him making it out of this alive.

Above him, he heard Hannibal sigh once more.

“Mylimasis.” He murmured, stroking Will’s cheek with his thumb. “I know I’ve failed you. I admit I’ve lied to you so many times over the years, and that I’ve hurt you more than anyone else ever could, both intentionally and accidentally. I know all of that, and I know you have no reason to trust me now and I have no right to even ask you to…but do you think you can try? Just this once? For just five minutes? Can you trust me?”

Will opened his eyes. His vision was a bit blurry through the veil of tears he was looking through, but he could tell Hannibal was looking down at him. He blinked, trying to clear his vision, and when he finally saw the look on Hannibal’s face, he swallowed.

“... *Yes* .” He whispered back, as fiercely as he could.

Hannibal’s eyes widened, and for a moment he gazed down at Will with such wonder, such open and absolute adoration, that Will was beginning to feel a bit overwhelmed by it all, when Hannibal suddenly smiled. “Thank you, Will.” He said, kissing his forehead. “I promise I won’t let you down.”

“Mmm.” Will hummed, blinking heavily, drifting on the edge of consciousness as Hannibal continued to pat and soothe him.

It was quiet, peaceful. For a moment, Will forgot that anything was wrong...

And then…

“Get the kerosene.” He heard Dmitri mutter from across the room.

Will went rigid where he lay, looking over in time to see one of Dmitri’s men duck quickly into the kitchen beyond his sight. “Hannibal!” He warned.

“Shh. I know. I heard.” Hannibal reassured him before taking Will’s hand and guiding it down to his sluggishly bleeding leg. “Keep pressure on that.” He instructed. “Don’t worry, mylimasis. Everything’s going to be alright. Not one of these… *men* , if you can call them that, is getting out of here alive. After what they’ve done to you, I’ll make sure none of them have the chance to hurt you ever again.”

He began to pull away then, but before he could get too far, Will suddenly grabbed his wrist. Hannibal stilled instantly, glancing down at Will’s hand wrapped around his.

“Yes, what is it, darling?”

“Not all of them.” Will hissed hatefully. “Boris is *mine* .”

Will wondered if it would ever get old, the thrill of knowing he had managed to surprise Hannibal, the deliciously, deliriously powerful feeling of knowing that he was the only one in the entire world who truly could.

‘ *No* .’ He decided, watching as understanding slowly dawned on Hannibal’s face, and a wickedly cruel smile slowly unfolded over his lips. ‘ *I could spend every day of the rest of my life seeing that look on his face, and every time would still feel like the first time.* ’

Hannibal beamed at him.

“Of course, mylimasis.” He purred. “Whatever you want.”

So saying, he raised Will’s bloodstained fingers to his lips and kissed them.

“Now,” He said after he had pulled away and pressed Will’s hand back over his thigh. “Be a good boy for me and do as you’re told. I promise this will all be over soon.”

Will nodded, and Hannibal pushed himself to his feet.

“Now, gentlemen!” He said, clapping his hands sarcastically together. “Where were we?”

Dmitri had just opened his mouth to answer him when his man suddenly re-emerged from the kitchen with two large, red fuel cans in each hand. Dmitri seemed to noticeably relax as the man scurried over to him and set them at his feet. “Thank you, Viktor.” He said before turning back to Hannibal with a scowl. “You have quite the debt to repay, Dr. Lecter.”

“Do I?” Hannibal said airily, drifting a few paces away from Will. “I don’t recall ever agreeing to pay for Yuri’s services-”

“But you still took the passport he made for you. Didn’t you?” Dmitri spat, watching Hannibal warily as he continued to move around the room, maneuvering slowly but surely closer to him.

He’s distracted, Will realized. His attention was focused entirely on Hannibal.

This was his chance.

Very carefully, his heart pounding the entire time, Will stretched out his hand, reaching for the abandoned gun under the couch.

“Considering how deeply he insulted me, it seemed the least I was owed.” Hannibal said coldly, coming to a sudden stop in the middle of the room. Will glanced over at him curiously, his fingers brushing against the cool metal of the gun. Hannibal wasn’t even looking at Dmitri and the others anymore, but over at the sitting room window, gazing at it with his head slightly cocked, and Will frowned when he took a very small, very precise step back. What was he doing?

“I’m afraid I don’t ‘owe’ you anything.” Dmitri snarled. “This is a business, Dr. Lecter. Not a charity.”

“I never said it was.” Hannibal agreed calmly, still refusing to look at Dmitri as he clasped his hands together behind his back and took another deliberate step away from the window.

“Then you understand what it is that you’ve done? What you’ve taken from me?”

“Could you be more specific please?” Hannibal asked him. “Are we talking about the documents, or Yuri, or your revenue?”

“All of it.” Dmitri said through his yellow teeth.

“Oh, I understand just fine.” Hannibal assured him cheerfully. “I just don’t care.”

Will slowly pulled the gun closer to him, tucking it safely against his side, out of sight.

“Well, I’m afraid that *I* care, Dr. Lecter.” Dmitri growled. “I care very much. Those papers were easily worth several hundred thousand dollars, and Yuri was not someone who can easily be replaced.”

“Yes, quite the predicament you’re in. Where does one find both a master forger and pedophile, I wonder?”

“Regardless of what he was,” Dmitri all but shouted, “Yuri was invaluable! He made me several million dollars a year! Several million! Several million that I’m now out of, because of you!”

“That seems a bit unfair.” Hannibal said. “To put all the blame on me. I assure you I never would have done what I did if he hadn’t given me good reason to.”

“You’re saying this is Yuri’s fault?!”

“Yes, precisely.”

‘ *God, Hannibal, what are you doing?!* ’ Will groaned to himself as Dmitri cursed him. ‘ *Are you* trying *to make him shoot you?”*

“I simply don’t understand what you want me to do about it.” He heard Hannibal say then. “Bad things happen to people all the time. If Yuri was in an accident, or if he had a heart attack, you’d be in the exact same position as you are now, and yet I somehow doubt you’d be tracking anybody down and demanding money from them.”

“You can hardly compare deliberately murdering someone,” Dmitri snarled, “With an act of God!”

“I can when it concerns me.”

Dmitri closed his eyes and exhaled long and slow through his nose. “Of course you can.” He muttered, more to himself than to Hannibal, and then, louder, “Though I doubt God has nearly as much money as you do, Dr. Lecter.”

“No, probably not.” Hannibal allowed with a shrug. “But even so, I’m sure you can understand that after my incarceration, getting that money is a little more difficult and time-consuming than it used to be.”

“I don’t mind waiting.”

“I do.” Hannibal snapped. “You see, unlike you, I don’t have the luxury of time - Will’s femoral artery was clipped when you shot him, and unless I manage to get the bleeding under control, he’s not going to make it to the morning. And I guarantee you that if I lose him, I’ll be far less inclined to do anything for you, much less let you live.”

Dmitri frowned, and glanced questioningly back at Will, still lying where he had left him, and Will felt a faint prickle of fear at Hannibal's words. Though he was sure he was lying, that if Dmitri had really hit him at such a major, vital point as his femoral artery, then he'd already be dead, he also felt that there was some truth to what Hannibal was saying, but just what that truth was, he wasn't sure. How bad *was* he hurt? What exactly had Dmitri done to him?

"I don't think," Dmitri said slowly, "You quite understand the position you're in. You seem to actually believe you can beat me, Dr. Lecter."

"Oh, I know I can." Hannibal told him. "There's five of you against the two of us, and I did promise Will he could have Boris, so, technically, that's only four I have to deal with." He smiled then. "Doesn't really seem like much of a fight to me."

Dmitri snorted. "I'm sorry." He said, "But I don't think you're going to get much help from Mr. Graham with this, Dr. Lecter. He hardly seems like a threat to anyone at the moment."

"You shouldn't underestimate him." Hannibal advised him, shooting Will a fond look. "As similar as we are, I assure you, he's far more vicious than I could ever claim to be."

"Oh, is that so?" Dmitri drawled before turning away from Hannibal toward Boris. "Boris. Bring me Mr. Graham. Let's see just how 'vicious' he really is, shall we?"

Boris reacted to the command immediately, and Will couldn't help but tense as he took several enormous footsteps closer, his hulking frame looming threateningly over him. He glanced nervously at Hannibal, wondering why he wasn't saying anything, if he was going to try and stop him-

But Hannibal didn't move. He kept his face carefully blank, watching Will closely as Boris approached him, and Will knew that even if Hannibal seemed utterly indifferent to what was happening, he was anything but. That he was excited by this sudden turn of events, eager to see what exactly Will would do next…

And it was this, Hannibal's absolute calm despite everything, that reassured him. Because Will knew that if Hannibal honestly didn't think he was safe, that he couldn't handle himself,

then he wouldn't hesitate to intervene, to save him. The fact that he wasn't told Will everything he needed to know: that he could beat Boris. That Hannibal believed in him.

That somehow, he was going to be okay.

And so when Boris suddenly grabbed him, his powerful hands fisting the front of his jacket, ready to haul Will away, he wasn't afraid. Instead, he felt strangely calm, like he was empty inside.

He looked up at Boris, at his wide, slack face, and gripped Chiyoh's gun even tighter.

"This is for Nadine." He said before raising his arm and firing.

The gunshot was deafening, and Boris's head snapped back instantly, blood spraying everywhere. He crumpled to the ground beside Will in a heap, and Will studied his lifeless body, the hole between his eyes and the clotted mess inside, only dimly aware of the chaos that had erupted around him and the world beyond Boris's empty stare.

It was amazing that something capable of so much damage could be ended so easily…

It was the unmistakable sound of a gun being cocked and his own name that brought Will back.

"Viktor, get Graham's gun!" Dmitri was howling from across the room. "Igor, Nikolai! Cover him!"

Will felt a sharp stab of annoyance at those words, and he jerked his head around in time to see Dmitri's remaining men shakily raise their guns before taking several, slow steps closer to him. He watched them as they cautiously advanced, knowing that there was nothing he could do to stop them, that if he moved even so much as an inch, they'd fire instantly, without hesitating. He was, for all intents and purposes, completely at their mercy, despite the fact that he had a gun. He heaved a sigh.

From behind them, Hannibal smirked.

“Something amusing, Lecter?” Dmitri growled.

“Tremendously amusing, yes.”

“Do you feel like sharing with the rest of us?”

“No need. You’ll see in just a moment.” Hannibal promised him, and Will frowned. What did he mean? Did he really expect Will to do something to stop them? What? What could he possibly do?

Apparently, one of Dmitri’s men was wondering the same thing, because he suddenly stopped, glancing nervously back over his shoulder at his boss. Dmitri glowered at him.

“Who told you to stop?” He snapped, and the man took another quick step forward, closer to Will.

Hannibal grinned.

“What?! You think you’re the one in control here?!” Dmitri snarled at him, spit flying as he raised his pistol, pointing it at Hannibal. “You’re in control of nothing! I’m in control! Not you!”

And as if to try and emphasize his point, he kicked over one of the fuel cans, stomping it into the ground. There was a loud crack as the plastic split, and the pungent stench of gasoline soon filled the room. Hannibal grimaced at the smell, and Dmitri kicked the can over to him, liquid spilling everywhere. Taking one hand off the gun, Dmitri reached into his pocket and pulled out a lighter.

“You disrespect me again,” He said, “And I’ll show you who’s really in charge.”

“Go right ahead.” Hannibal told him. “As Napoleon once said, ‘Never interrupt your enemy when he’s making a mistake’.”

Dmitri’s face flushed scarlet, his lips white with rage, and he looked over at his men, hovering hesitantly between him and Will.

“What are you doing?!” He screamed at them. “Bring me Graham! NOW!”

Each jerked as if he had been slapped, and crept a little nearer, closing the distance between them and Will a little more. Will watched them approach from the corner of his eye, his heart pounding. They were almost there. They’d be on him in seconds. And once they reached him…

Will grip around his gun tightened.

He knew he couldn’t win against them. That it was over. That he was going to die.

But if he had to choose between dying like a man or being put down like a dog, he’d go down fighting.

Will raised the gun just as they passed the sitting room window, ready to fire…

And that’s when it happened.

The window, the one between him and the others, the one Hannibal had been so fixated with, exploded.

Will started violently, ribs and leg and skull all protesting, as the glass splintered, shattered, went flying, and to his shock, and the man called Viktor suddenly dropped, blood and brain matter splattering across the floor.

Dmitri and the others froze, staring down at the corpse in disbelief, with horror, trying to understand what had just happened, but before they could ponder it for too long, there came the sound of a gunshot, and another of Dmitri's men dropped beside the first, each just as lifeless as the other.

Dmitri's last man scrambled back, away from the window, staring at it fearfully as he pressed himself against the opposite wall. Will blinked, and looked from the dead Russians to the living ones, from Dmitri's stunned expression to Hannibal's amused one.

"I'm sorry. Did I say 'five against two'?" He asked. "I meant 'five against three'. That's Chiyoh, by the way. I hope you'll forgive her for not joining us. She's a bit reserved, I'm afraid. Doesn't like meeting new people. But she is an *excellent* shot. Never misses. Just ask Will."

As he was speaking, Hannibal took a single step closer to Dmitri, and the Russian recoiled immediately from him. "Stay back!" He shouted, raising his gun again, pointing it at Hannibal's chest. "Stay back!"

"Hannibal, don't!" Will begged him, terrified, as Hannibal took another step. "Get away from him!"

"Will, darling." Hannibal called back to him as he continued forward. "Do you have a clear shot of that last man? Can you get him?"

"STAY BACK! I'M WARNING YOU-"

"No." Will said, desperately trying to raise himself up on one arm. "Hannibal, please-"

“ENOUGH!” Dmitri roared, flicking his lighter and holding the little flame aloft. “NICKOLAI! SHOOT HIM! SHOOT HIM NOW!”

Nickolai looked wildly from Hannibal to Will, his gun wavering from one to the other, clearly unsure just who Dmitri was referring to.

“DO IT! DO IT NOW!”

Nickolai settled the gun on Hannibal, finger slipping around the trigger, ready to pull it-

Will raised his gun and fired. Nickolai winced as the wall beside him caved in, the bullet missing him by centimeters. Will fired again…again, and Nickolai turned from Hannibal to him. Will shifted over just a bit, ignoring the searing pain of his shattered ribs, and fired one more time.

Nickolai stumbled back, slamming against the wall, blood spurting from his neck. He dropped the gun as he slid slowly down the wall to the floor, leaving a wide streak of bright red blood in his wake.

He didn’t move again.

For a moment, no one spoke. Dmitri stared at Nickolai’s body, his face curiously blank, and then he slowly turned back to Hannibal. Hannibal smiled, showing his teeth.

“Looks like it’s just you and me now.”

Dmitri jerked back, fumbling with the lighter before he tossed it on the ground. It hit the kerosene, igniting instantly. Will cried out, horrified, as the flames erupted, enveloping the room in a golden blaze.

But Hannibal ignored the flames, calmly stepping over them. “I’m afraid that won’t help you.” He said as he moved closer to Dmitri. “Nothing can help you now…”

Will couldn’t see what was happening - he was too far away, he was too low on the ground, the flames too high. But he heard a gunshot, and he knew Hannibal was unarmed.

“HANNIBAL!” He screamed, as another shot rang out. “HANNIBAL!”

There was a loud crash, a shout, the sounds of a struggle…and then came a terrible, hair-raising shriek of agony, a wail unlike anything Will had ever heard before - and then there was nothing.

Will’s breath caught, and he felt his blood run cold.

“HANNIBAAAAL!”

“I’m right here, Will!” Hannibal called back over the crackling flames, and Will sobbed with relief. “I’m alright. Everything’s alright. It’s over. It’s over, mylimasis.”

Will nodded, despite knowing Hannibal couldn’t see him, and slowly lowered his head, resting it against the hardwood floor. He could feel the adrenaline beginning to taper off, his body going limp, the cold and pain beginning to creep in. God, he was tired. He was so, so tired…

There was a strange scuffling noise, and then there were hands on his body, gently shaking him awake.

“No, no, Will!” He heard Hannibal say, his voice frantic. “Stay awake! Stay with me, sweetheart, please!”

Will forced himself to open his eyes, gazing up at Hannibal's worried face, his blood-smeared mouth. He blinked. "Did you kill him?" He asked, and even to himself, he sounded dazed.

"I did." Hannibal assured him, pulling Will into his arms, cradling him close. "He's gone, Will. He's gone. He can't hurt you anymore, I promise. It's over."

Will nodded again and raised a shaky hand to touch Hannibal's, where it rested on his neck, over his pulse. He heaved a sigh.

"I love you." He said, his voice no more than a whisper. "So much. More than anything. I just wanted you to know that." He bit his lip as it began to tremble. "Please tell me you know that."

"Shh. I do know it, Will." Hannibal assured him. "It's okay. I know…I know…"

Will could feel himself slipping, his hold on his consciousness weakening, as the edge of his vision went gray and a wave of exhaustion washed over him. "I'm so tired." He said, closing his eyes. "I just wanna sleep."

"No, Will! Stay awake!" Hannibal ordered, nudging him again. "Open your eyes! I'm going to get you out of here. We're getting out right now. Just hold on-"

Will whimpered fearfully as Hannibal's arms snaked under his knees, his shoulders. "On the count of three." Hannibal warned him. "One…two…three…"

Will gasped as Hannibal lifted him up, as his ribs and the bullet in his leg shifted under his skin, and he wailed as he was carried away, despite how carefully Hannibal held him, how slowly he went, trying not to jostle him, to shield him from any more pain as he bore him away.

"It's alright, Will." Hannibal said, glancing down at him as they crossed the threshold of the burning, crumbling house. "Everything's alright. I'm going to take care of you. I'm going to

take the pain away, I promise. Just stay with me."

Will shuddered in the cold, clear air, burrowing as close to Hannibal as he possibly could and gritting his teeth as Hannibal continued down the porch steps and across the yard.

"Chiyoh!" He called out his voice echoing though the night, over the roar of the flames. "Chiyoh! Where are you? We need to go!"

"Hannibal!" Will heard her shout, and he turned to see her trotting out from the shadows, her rifle slung over her shoulder. "Did you get Will? Is he alright?"

"I have him." Hannibal told her, carrying Will over to his car. "But he's hurt. We need to get him back to the apartment. Fast."

"What about the house?" Chiyoh asked him, darting forward to open the door for him. "It's going to burn-"

"Let it." Hannibal said, laying Will across the back seat. "The less evidence that remains, the better."

Will bit back a groan as he was settled in place, panting shallowly as Hannibal began to work, ripping and tearing the fabric of his pants, trying to better see the wound beneath, just how extensive the damage was. His eyes widened. "Drive, Chiyoh. Hurry."

Will heard the engine turning over, felt the car rumble to life underneath him, and he was aware that they were moving, of Hannibal above him, talking to him, urging him to stay awake, trying to comfort and reassure him…

But it all seemed so quiet, so very far away from him...

Will squinted, trying to see through the spots that were growing across his vision.

“Izz so dark.” He slurred. “‘m so cold.”

Hannibal looked over at him sharply.

He seemed frightened.

“Will, look at me.” The words were muted, faint, coming in and out of focus as if he was switching between radio stations. “You need…awake. Will…understand? No…Will…”

The darkness was warm and soft, gentle and loving, as it embraced him, inviting him in, tugging him down, down, down, away from the pain that had held him so tightly for so long.

Will went with it eagerly.

—-------

There were hints of sound.

(A lilting murmur. Foreign words. Familiar words. Talking to him. Singing to him. Calling him, begging him to hang on, to stay, to wake up…)

And vague sensations.

(Mostly nice ones, the kind that suggested comfort, safety. Blankets tucked carefully around him. A warm hand in his. Soft lips pressed against his forehead.

And a few unpleasant ones as well - fire in his lungs, the feeling that he couldn't breathe, his muscles seizing, metal worming deep inside him, hot blood running down his leg, hands holding him down while he screamed and cried…)

But mostly it was dark, a world of perpetual night as boundless as the sea with Will caught somewhere in between the waking and the dreaming…

—-------

After a while, there was a shift.

An awakening of sorts, a sudden awareness that wasn't there before. One moment he wasn't, and the next he was.

But exactly *where* he was, just how long he had been there, Will didn't know.

It was very dark. And time seemed to move differently here - it was impossible to tell whether it dragged or ran, jumped forward or back, how much of it had passed. If Will had spent a few seconds there or an entire lifetime.

He didn't really mind, not knowing.

It was peaceful, wherever he was. It didn't hurt here, surrounded by darkness and suspended in time, and WIll could have been content to remain that way forever…

And then there was a light.

It was very small, and very soft. Faint. And though it was far away, Will felt it might be warm. Safe.

Will liked the light. It was good company, that little beacon shining distantly out in the darkness, keeping it at bay…

It took him a while to realize that it was slowly getting bigger. Or perhaps it was just getting closer. Bigger and bigger, closer and closer, brighter and brighter, the light was growing, first chasing the darkness away and then swallowing it up, bit by bit, more and more and more until -

Will blinked.

The light was just a lamp. A unremarkable, squat, little lamp, a simple electric bulb, perched on a nightstand just a few feet away.

Will blinked again, looked down at himself.

Where…?

He was lying in a bed he had never seen before, swathed in blankets, and his body felt very stiff, as if he hadn't moved in a long time. He shifted, trying to get comfortable, and something tugged painfully at his arm, pinching the crook of his elbow, while something plastic crinkled under his hips.

Will sighed. He didn't know what he expected - suffering and humiliation were pretty part and parcel when it came to Hannibal, even when he was on his good side, he knew that.

Slight movement from the corner of his vision kept Will from dwelling on the issue any further. He slowly turned his head…

…and wasn't the least bit surprised by what he saw.

Slumped in the chair beside his bed, fast asleep, his fingers loosely tangled in Will's, was Hannibal.

Will studied him, his mussed hair, the shadows under his eyes, the tight lines around his mouth, and he frowned.

He looked like shit.

' *I've never seen him like this before.* ' Will thought worriedly. ' *Did something happen? Was he hurt? I didn't think he was, but maybe…God, if he looks this bad, then what do I look like?* '

And though he didn't move, didn't utter a single sound as he lay there musing about how awful he must look and wondering what had happened, Hannibal suddenly began to stir, as if he had somehow sensed that Will had woken up and was waiting for him.

Will watched as his cold, dark eyes snapped open, softening the moment they found Will's. He smiled.

"Hello, Will."

He said it gently, as if the very sound of his voice was enough to break Will apart. Will swallowed.

"…'lo." Will rasped back, and Hannibal was quick to grab a cup of water that was sitting on the nightstand.

"Here." He said, his large hand cradling the back of Will's head, holding it up so that he could drink. "Slowly, slowly…that's it."

It was as much relief as it was torture, and Will pulled away after only a few small sips, ignoring the worried look on Hannibal's face as he carefully eased him back down to his pillow.

"Are you with me now, Will?" He asked. "How are you feeling?"

Will frowned. "Was I with you before?"

"You've been in and out of consciousness for the past two days." Hannibal told him. "But this is the first time you've been lucid."

"Oh." Will said, and, not sure what else there was to say, looked around the room. It was very grand - the vaulted ceilings were adorned with intricately carved molding, and the walls were pale and bare, devoid of any personal touches. There were windows, half-hidden behind rich fabrics, and a pair of French doors that led to a balcony. It was dark outside, the horizon streaked with red. Whether it was daybreak or dusk was hard to say. "Where are we?"

"Chiyoh's apartment." Hannibal explained as he felt Will's pulse. "Remember? She told us she had found one in the city. That she would be staying there until it was time to move on."

Will considered this. "Is this where you've been this whole time?" He asked. "With her?"

"Yes."

Will was quiet while Hannibal checked his lungs, his heart.

"Why didn't you call?" He whispered only once Hannibal had finally finished and began to turn away. "That whole time…I thought…didn't you miss me?"

Hannibal looked back at him. "More than anything."

“Were…” Will hesitated, avoiding his eyes, not sure if he wanted to know. “Are you angry with me?”

“No, mylimasis.” Hannibal soothed, laying his hand over Will’s head, stroking his hair. “I was never angry with you.”

Will blinked back tears. “Then why…?”

Hannibal sighed regretfully. “Because you were angry with me, Will.” He reminded him. “And you had every right to be. I was just trying to give you space. Time to calm down and think about what had happened, what you wanted. I thought it would be better to let you come to me when you were ready. That if I called you, I would only push you away. That I would lose you forever.”

“...Oh.” Will said again, feeling very small. He was quiet for a few minutes, thinking. “Are we going to live here now?”

“For a little while. At least until you’ve healed.”

“Is it bad?”

Hannibal seemed to be debating how to answer him. “It wouldn’t be so bad,” He said at last, “If you were in a hospital. You’re going to be keeping Chiyoh and I very busy for the next few weeks.”

Will pondered these words, what they meant, and he sighed.

Or, at least, he tried to.

He could only inhale so deep before the pain became too great.

“God, I bet Chiyoh’s just thrilled to be dealing with me again, isn’t she?” He said once he could. “She’s probably counting down the days till we leave.”

“Probably.” Hannibal agreed cheerfully. “You’ve already managed to offend her several times since we got here.”

Will narrowed his eyes. Just how exactly he had done that, when he had been alternating between unconsciousness and delirium for the past few days, he didn’t know and he wasn’t sure he wanted to.

“And then what?” He asked instead, desperate to change the subject. “Once I’m better? Where will we go?”

“Anywhere you want.” Hannibal assured him quickly. “Just say the word, Will, and we’re there.”

“...Hmm.” Will hummed, blinking sleepily. Just the thought of what lay ahead for them, the decision he would be expected to make, was exhausting. “Anywhere, huh?”

“Anywhere.” Hannibal promised him, taking his hand. “I’ll follow wherever you go.”

Will smiled, his eyelids beginning to droop. “Hope you don’t regret that later.”

“Never.” Hannibal swore before leaning over to kiss him on the cheek. “As long as I have you, Will, I’m happy.”

“That’s still a lot of pressure on me, you know.” Will mumbled, half-asleep. “Having to decide where we’ll…”

And then it hit him.

Will's eyes flew open with a gasp, ignoring the pain in his ribs, his exhaustion forgotten. Hannibal was on him instantly.

"Will?" He fussed, hands fluttering over him. "What is it?"

"T-the house." Will said, his voice weak with horror. "It was burning…" He looked at Hannibal, dread curdling in his chest. "Please tell me it didn't. It's still there, right? It has to be. Someone would have seen it, they would have called the police. They managed to put the fire out in time, didn't they?"

Hannibal hesitated, eyeing him warily. "…Will-"

" *Didn't they* ?"

Hannibal sighed.

"I'm sorry, Will. It's gone."

It hurt, hearing it. Like getting punched in the gut (or kicked in the ribs).

Not that it was a surprise, not really.

But still.

It was one thing to suspect something. Another to know it.

Will groaned, closing his eyes. He bit his lip so hard he tasted blood, releasing it only when he felt Hannibal reach out and lightly stroke his cheek.

“What is it, Will?” He asked him gently. “What’s wrong?”

“The passports.” Will reminded him tonelessly. “The documents. They were in the house, in our room.” He raised his arms, burying his face in his hands. “It was all for nothing.” He said, his voice muffled. “We’re stuck here. We can’t leave now.”

Above him, Hannibal was quiet.

“…They’re not lost, Will.” He said after a moment. “I have them.”

Will was sure he had misheard him. That, or he was hallucinating (again). “What?”

“I have the documents. All of them. Yours and mine.”

Will peeked up at him from between his fingers. “What? How?”

“I took them.” Hannibal said. He sounded…almost anxious. Guilty. “The night I left.”

Will lowered his hands, hardly daring to believe what he was hearing. “But my papers.” He stammered. “I don’t understand. I had them. I hid them. They were…you didn’t…”

“You hid them under the mattress.” Hannibal said flatly. “On your side of the bed. I found them one day, while I was changing the sheets.” He glanced at Will. “I took yours and mine when I left. Remember? I went to our room to get my things. I grabbed your papers on my way out.”

Will stared at him. “But *why* ?”

Hannibal shrugged. “Insurance.” He confessed. “You were so angry with me that night. I thought…I thought I had really lost you. That you were going to walk away from me forever, disappear somewhere I would never find you again. So I took the papers. I figured that if you did forgive me, I could slip them back without you ever even noticing that they were gone. And if not…well. At least then, you would have a reason to call me again, when you tried to leave and realized they were gone.”

The silence that followed was one of the loudest that had ever fallen between them.

“You’re unbelievable.” Will said at last, his voice shaking with rage.

“Will-”

“You *took* them? *Really?!* Are you *kidding* me?!”

“Will, calm down.”

“After everything you’ve done?!!” Will snapped. “This is calm! I can’t believe you! *I can’t believe you* !”

“Sweetheart, that’s enough.” Hannibal said firmly. “You’re going to tear your stitches.”

Will collapsed back against his pillow with a growl. He knew Hannibal well enough to know he wouldn’t hesitate to sedate him if he thought it was for the best, and that was the last thing Will wanted now. He wanted this fight. He wanted to be angry. And he wanted to make sure Hannibal knew it.

“You wanted to ‘give me time and space to think about what I wanted’.” He muttered irritably to himself. “What complete *bullshit* .”

Hannibal frowned. “It wasn’t ‘bullshit’.” He insisted. “I meant every word. I wanted you to make your own decision.”

“Just as long as it was the right decision.” Will snarled. “The one you wanted me to make.” He turned away, glaring at a spot on the wall. “God, you are never gonna change, are you?”

Hannibal didn’t answer him right away.

“...I am what I am.” He said eventually. “You know that. And you know why.”

Will winced.

He did know.

He knew Hannibal, understood him, better than anyone. He knew how much he had loved his sister. What losing her had done to him. How he had spent his entire life believing he was incapable of loving anyone else, a monster with a man’s face, appreciating humanity from a distance, an outsider looking in, trying to blend in but knowing he never truly could…

Until he had met Will. And the moment he had, he knew that there was someone out there who could look at him and see him for all he truly was. Without flinching, without recoiling, without revulsion. That he could be understood, appreciated…

…Loved.

Will knew all that. He knew how important he was to Hannibal. That in his own, twisted way, he truly did love him. That there wasn’t anything he wouldn’t do for him.

That there wasn't anything he wouldn't do to keep him…

That he would lie. He would manipulate. He would kill…

And he would do it all for Will.

Will sighed, ignoring the painful twinge in his ribs. Above him, Hannibal's fingers flexed, like he wanted nothing more than to reach out and touch Will and had to restrain himself from giving in and doing so. He shifted back and forth on his feet, watching Will.

It was the most nervous he had ever seen him.

"You were born for me, Will." Hannibal whispered after a while. "Just as I was made for you. We belong together."

Will closed his eyes.

There were just some things he couldn't fight.

Hannibal.

The fact that he was Will's destiny, one way or another.

His own nature. The person he really was, the man he had fought so hard for so long to become…

…Until Hannibal had set him free.

“...I know.” Will said.

There was a small intake of breath, and Will opened his eyes again. He glared at Hannibal, ignoring the look of absolute adoration, wonder and awe, on his face. “Are you just going to stand there? Come here.”

Hannibal hesitated for just a second before climbing gingerly onto the bed. He watched Will closely as he lay down beside him. “You’re not angry with me?”

“Oh, I am. I’m absolutely furious with you.” Will informed him, wiggling closer to Hannibal and nuzzling against him. “You’re going to spend a long time making it up to me.”

Hannibal blinked. “Of course, mylimasis.” He said, carefully drawing Will into his arms. “But why-”

“I’m tired.” Will said, his eyes fluttering shut. “I’ll give you hell for it later. When I’m feeling up for it.”

“Alright.” Hannibal answered. “I’m looking forward to it. For now, get some rest, Will. You need it.”

“Hmm.”

The two fell silent after that. Will drowsy, nestled in Hannibal’s arms, and Hannibal happy, gently stroking Will’s hair, lulling him to sleep.

It was a peace that Will had never known, a calm that he had never felt before…

He opened his eyes.

“...Hannibal?” He mumbled.

“Yes, my love?”

“Did you give me something?”

“I’ve given you a few things.” Hannibal told him. “Blood thinners to prevent clots. And morphine for the pain-”

“No.” Will said, listening to the steady beating of his heart. “That’s not…I mean did you give me any barbiturates? Or some other kind of hypnotic?”

There was a slight pause.

“No.” Hannibal said, sounding confused. “I haven’t given you anything like that. Why?”

“I feel…different.”

“Different how?”

“I...” Will frowned. “I don’t know. I just feel…like I’m not the same person I was before.”

“You’ve undergone a very traumatic experience, Will.” Hannibal reminded him. “I’m sure in some ways, you’re not the same person you were before.”

Will shook his head. “It feels like more than just that.”

“We can discuss it later. When you’re better.” Hannibal gently tapped his nose. “No more talking, mylimasis. Go to sleep.”

He waited until Will had obediently closed his eyes before pressing a kiss on his forehead.

“By the way, Will.” Will heard him whisper as he was drifting off. “Happy Birthday.”

Chapter End Notes

This is the last official chapter of the story. Hopefully, it did not disappoint.

I'm debating about doing an epilogue - there's still 2 or 3 things I want to address before I officially sign off, and I know how I want to do it. The problem is, when I was writing the outline for the epilogue, I felt like I might not be able to pull it off. So I'm going to attempt it, but I make no promises that it will happen. If I can't make it work by the end of December, I'll consider the story finished.

Also: does anyone want me to post an explanation for what the hell's going on with the story? Like what the different "ghosts" symbolize and what exactly is happening when Will sees them?

Thank you so, so much for reading! Thank you for every like and comment that you left me - they meant everything to me - you guys were what kept me going!

Epilogue: Give Up the Ghost, No More Haunting, Baby

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

18 Months Later

Quantico, VA

Jack Crawford had read the report three times and still somehow hadn't managed to take in more than a few words for his trouble. He tried again, attempting to ignore the headache that was building behind his eyes as he began to scan it a fourth time, determined to read it in its entirety…

He only made it halfway through the first sentence before he finally gave up.

Frustrated, he shoved the paper aside.

It didn't really matter, he told himself as turned away, away from his desk and the papers scattered across it, toward the window that overlooked the surrounding grounds and the forest beyond the BAU. He got the gist of it.

'...Agent Crawford…the facts being…convicted sex offender found dead…unable to determine cause of death…no evidence recovered…no discernible connection to previous… in regards to the so-called ' **Angel of Death** '...serial murder unlikely…thank you for your concern.'

Jack sighed, squinting out at the world that lay before him, and couldn't help but feel depressed, unsatisfied, with what he saw - the gray pavement of the parking lot surrounded by gray, twisted branches of barren, leafless trees, reaching up to gray skies that were heavy with even grayer clouds that promised rain…

As depressing as it was, it seemed fitting, somehow.

He heaved another sigh and pinched his brow, massaging it, trying to iron out the pain that lingered there. He shifted in his chair, avoiding the pile of pages gathered around him, the work he was beginning to feel he could no longer do…

Jack Crawford was feeling his age.

He had felt it creeping up on him for a while now, ever since he had lost Bella. But it had been easier to ignore back then. He'd had distractions, things he felt he had to do, things that kept him going when he had every reason to just lie down and give up. In a way, he owned Lecter a lot - the Ripper had been an obsession of his for years. The fact that he had been unmasked at last, that he was in the wind right before Bella had died was more than enough to numb the pain of losing her, to turn him blind and deaf to his own impending mortality while hers was laid so undeniably at his feet. Back then, death had been a buzz of meaningless white noise at the back of his skull that he heard before he fell asleep, a chill that brushed only occasionally against him. It was something faint, something he could pretend he hadn't noticed.

But now…

Now, he woke with stiff joints and aching bones. His attention, once laser sharp, was beginning to waver. It wandered more and more each day. He dreaded physicals and the lectures about his weight and blood pressure and cholesterol that followed, the question of whether this time, *this time* , he'd finally be declared unfit for service, and what he would do then. The higher ups were already pushing him to ease up, consider a change of pace, to be more involved with the trainees, and he resisted tooth and nail - the transition from field work to teaching was the death knell of a man's career, everyone knew that.

But mostly…mostly Jack knew he was getting old because there were some things, intangible things, he simply couldn't deny any more. The regrets that had always been able to ignore, the choices he had once been able to justify, were not so easy to disregard now. They haunted him in the small hours of the night and the quiet moments he had to himself. They followed him relentlessly now, and the knowledge that there were fewer years ahead of him than there were behind him, hung heavy overhead. Every day that passed, his death seemed to be

approaching faster and faster, a runaway train speeding down a slope that was gradually becoming a mountain. He had never been especially religious growing up, and whatever faith he'd had had been squashed in the course of his career. The things he'd seen, the evil he had encountered, had convinced him that there wasn't - couldn't be - a God. Not a merciful one, anyway.

But now…

Now Jack was running out of time, and he knew he had a lot to answer for.

The first and foremost being Will Graham.

Jack tried not to think about that too much. It was too painful, the guilt of knowing what he had done, the undeniable fact that he had been the one who had pushed Will to his breaking point. That it was him who had introduced him to Hannibal Lecter, had led him like a lamb to slaughter right into the monster's jaws when he insisted that he see him, then pursue him, then use him. That if it wasn't for him, Will would still be…

Jack shook his head, refusing to let himself go there. It was hard. It was easier in the beginning, in those first few days after he had disappeared, when things were too fresh, too raw, to be real. But now, lately, lately, it seemed that Will and what had happened to him (and why) was all that he could think about. It was bad now, and bad as it was, he could only imagine just how bad it would become as the two year anniversary of his and Lecter's… *death* approached…

A sudden, sharp rap at the door jolted Jack from his thoughts, and he turned to find Alana Bloom, dressed in bright red and sharp lines, stepping into his office. "Alana." He said, his heart sinking. "This is a surprise."

"Jack." She said, extending her hand as she crossed the room in long, purposeful strides. "I hope I'm not interrupting. I was giving a guest lecture to the cadets and thought I'd say hello."

“No, not at all.” He said with a smile that wasn’t returned as he clasped her small hand in his. “Please, sit.”

“Thank you.” Alana said, just as coolly as before, as she sank gracefully into the seat across Jack’s desk. “It’s good to see you again, Jack.”

“It’s good to see you too.”

It wasn’t.

It was anything but.

Seeing her was like thinking about Will. And if Jack had any say in the matter, he would prefer to spend the rest of his life without ever seeing Alana Bloom again. Because seeing her now, in the harsh cut of her expensive suits when he could still remember the colorful, cheerful dresses she had once favored, was painful. Seeing her eyes so cold and so wise, seeing how heavy her gaze had become, how far she saw, when those eyes had once been so bright, so full of hope, was just another reminder of his failures. And seeing her mouth so rigidly set, framed by such deep lines, unable to remember the last time he had seen her smile, and knowing what a lovely smile it was, was enough to make him want to cry.

There was a long and awkward pause as they surveyed each other, two strangers who knew each other very well, who had so much between them and yet nothing to say beyond stiff and meaningless pleasantries.

“How have you been?” Jack blurted at last, desperate to break the silence that had fallen over them and not caring how clumsily he did it. “How’s your family?”

Alana looked away, and Jack breathed a little easier now that her steely gaze was no longer pinned on him.

“Fine.” She said, raising a delicate, white finger to touch the report he had tossed aside earlier. She dragged it closer, her eyes locked on the bold print, clearly intending to read it, and Jack couldn’t be bothered to scold her for it. “Everyone’s fine.”

Jack nodded. “Good, good…What about work?” He asked next, and Alana shrugged.

“Same old, same old.” She murmured without interest. “The criminally insane still exist. I’m still their keeper. And I intend to be as long as the city of Baltimore will let me. The ‘Angel of Death’?” She read aloud then, raising her eyes from the paper at last and cocking a perfectly sculpted eyebrow at him.

“Something the local newspapers came up with.” Jack explained with a shrug. “Referring to a series of murders involving criminals. Seems it’s stuck.”

Alana was quiet as she continued reading.

“Jack, this is saying that these deaths are completely unrelated to one another.” She pointed out after she had finished, and the slow, deliberate way she said it made Jack want to snatch the papers from her and tuck them safely out of sight. “That the police have no reason to suspect that they were even homicides.”

“I know.” Jack assured her quickly, feeling the need to justify himself. “It’s just I…” He heaved a sigh, unsure what to say to make her understand. “Old habits, I guess. They play tricks on you. Make you see things that aren’t really there.”

Alana didn’t answer right away. Instead, she blinked ice blue eyes that gave nothing away. Her face was a carefully constructed mask as she considered him. Jack resented her, this new Alana he had helped create but didn’t know. She made him miss the old one all the more.

“...I see him too.” She said after a moment, her voice soft. “All the time. Everywhere I go.”

Jack didn’t have to ask her who she was talking about.

He shook his head.

“It wasn’t Hannibal I was thinking of when I saw the reports.”

Alana frowned. “Then who?”

Jack hesitated.

“I was thinking of Will.” He confessed. “I don’t know why. Something about them…they made me think of him.”

Alana didn’t move. Her expression didn’t change in the slightest. But something about her very essence seemed to harden, and Jack swore the temperature in the room dropped a good ten degrees.

“Will’s dead, Jack.” She said, and Jack had to force himself not to flinch at her tone, how cold and matter-of-fact she was, and the thing she didn’t say and didn’t need to : *he’s dead because of you*.

“I know.” He said again, and he wasn’t sure if he was addressing the part she did say or the part she didn’t. “I know he is, I know.”

He turned away. He couldn’t bear looking at her. Outside, the clouds had finally broken open. Rain was drumming lightly on the window. Jack swallowed, his throat dry.

“I guess I just thought…I guess I’m still hoping that we’re wrong.” He sighed at last. “That’s he’s not gone, he’s just lost somewhere. And one day he’ll finally find his way back to us. That any day now he’s gonna walk through those doors again and he’ll be fine. Everything will be fine. Exactly the way it was before.”

It was a stupid fantasy and a childish one, Jack knew that. That even if by some miracle Will was still alive out there and did eventually find his way home, things would never, could never, ever be the same.

"…And if he did, Jack," Alana said then, her voice no more than a whisper. "What would you do then? Would you finally let him go? Keep him the way you did before?...Or would that be my job?"

Jack sighed. He had often wondered that same thing himself.

"I don't know." He admitted, turning to face Alana at last. "I really have no idea."

The two were quiet after that. Across from him, Alana sat silent and unmoving, with such an air of calm that it bordered on divine.

It seemed incredible to him that once, an entire lifetime ago, after Will had thrown up Abigail Hobbs' ear in his kitchen sink and was taken into federal custody, a very different Alana had stood before him in this same office, trembling with rage as she screamed and sobbed, reminding Jack that she had told him not to push Will, to not put him in the field, that he had failed him. She had blamed him for what happened to Will then. He wondered if she blamed him now.

Probably.

Among many other things.

He was relieved when Alana finally broke the silence with a sigh.

"Don't pity the dead, Jack. It does them no good." She said, rising to her feet. Her eyes were like chips of stone, sharp enough to pierce right through him. "And don't pity Will. He's better off the way he is."

Jack can’t help but flinch at that.

Of everything Alana has gained from Hannibal - her newfound insight and appreciation of evil, Margot, their son, their money, her position at the BSHCI and the prestige that came with it - her hardness, her cruelty, was the one thing he had given her that diminished her.

He missed the old Alana. She may have been naive, but at least she was kind.

And she never, *never* , would have said something like that.

Especially not about Will.

Jack was so stunned by what she said, so deeply wounded by it, that he didn’t even realize Alana was leaving until she was halfway across the room.

“I’m scheduled back as a guest lecturer next month. On the twenty-fourth.” She informed him over her shoulder as she grabbed the door and pulled it open. “Maybe we can meet up afterwards for dinner.”

“...Sure.” He said, thinking that there was nothing he’d like less.

“Great. I’ll send you an email.”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

Alana smiled, but it was far too small, too quick, to be real.

“You’ve got some smart students in this class, Jack.” She told him. “I was impressed with several of them. They’ll make good agents some day.”

“Really? Anyone in particular who stood out?”

“Um, Brigham. He was good. And there was one other one...” Her eyes narrowed, darted to the side, trying to remember. “…Starling. Her name was Starling. Very bright.”

“I’ll bear that in mind.”

There was something about Alana’s expression then that seemed almost sad. “Please don’t throw them in before they’re ready, Jack.” She said quietly, “We’ve already lost enough people that way.”

“You know I can’t promise that, Alana.”

“No, I suppose not.” Alana sighed and her mouth curled into a small, sardonic smile. “All give some. Some give all.”

“That’s the job.”

“…Yeah it is.” Alana lingered for a moment longer, studying him with eyes that were a two-way mirror, as if committing him to memory. “Goodbye, Jack.”

“Goodbye, Alana.” Jack murmured back, and he knew then that even though they would see each other again, whatever they had left between them, whatever familiarity and fondness they might still have for one another, would slowly but surely erode until there was nothing left at all. That they would gradually drift farther and farther apart until the guilt and resentment became too much. And then they wouldn’t see each other at all. Alana Bloom would become just one more person Jack had lost.

Alana.

Beverly.

Will…

Jack watched Alana as she turned and slipped out into the hall, and it was only once she rounded the corner and disappeared completely out of sight that he released the breath he had been holding and buried his face in his hands, relieved to finally see her gone.

‘ *Will’s dead, Jack…what would you do…would you finally let him go…don’t pity the dead, Jack…he’s better off the way he is…* ’

Jack heaved another sigh, her words echoing relentlessly in his head.

‘*. ..I see him too…All the time…* ”

What Jack wouldn’t give to be haunted by Hannibal Lecter instead of Will Graham. At least then, he’d be free of the guilt that had been slowly eating him alive since the day they’d stumbled upon Lecter’s cliffside house and the horror that lay waiting for them inside - Dolarhyde’s body torn apart. Security cameras with footage of Will pulling Hannibal with him over the side of the crag. There one moment. Gone the next.

Jack didn’t have many regrets in his life, at least not when it came to his time with the FBI. He couldn’t afford to. Sure, he had made some mistakes. There were situations he could have handled better. And he had the reputation for being a bastard, and a manipulative one at that, for a reason. But Jack’s job was to catch killers and lock them away by any means necessary. And he believed the end always justified those means.

Because there was evil in the world. Evil that took human form and did unspeakable things to good and innocent people. Jack had seen it, and all it was capable of, so many times over the years that in trying to eradicate it, he had lost some small part of himself in the process. He

hated it - it was cold and empty, that missing piece. It made decisions and demanded sacrifices he once never would have even considered before he'd joined the FBI. And if he had lost people, good people, along the way, well…it had always been just an issue of simple math: lose one, save a hundred. No, Jack Crawford didn't have many regrets....

But Will Graham would always be his biggest.

Jack pushed himself to his feet and turned away from his desk and the halls of the Bureau beyond it. Instead, he drifted over to the window, clasping his hands behind his back as he did. The rain was coming down harder now, the view beyond the glass smeared and indistinct. A flash of lightning streaked across the sky in the distance, and a low rumble of thunder followed close behind it. And as he stood staring out into the storm, trying not to think about Will and all the ways he'd failed him, Jack was suddenly struck by a memory from a time when things were simpler, when the Chesapeake Ripper was more myth than man, and Will was tortured but still innocent. It was after Will had been hired on by the Academy, and Jack, having heard of Will, what he was capable of, had attended the first lecture he had given at Quantico, determined to see for himself if the rumors were true. Not wanting to distract the cadets or draw attention to himself, Jack had hidden at the back of the room among the shadows, watching Will scowl as he set up the projector.

He had opened with a quote from Nietsche, a series of black words stamped across a simple white background.

'Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster. And if you gaze long enough into the abyss, the abyss will gaze back into you.'

Jack closed his eyes.

Will had looked into the abyss. He had looked long and hard at Jack's insistence and in the process, he had lost himself. How much of himself he had lost, whether it was just a piece or everything, Jack didn't know. He wasn't sure he wanted to. And maybe…maybe Alana was right. Maybe it was better that Will was dead. Surely he was better off dead than twisted into whatever Jack or Hannibal would have him be for their own sakes. And certainly better off dead than living as a monster. Anything was better than that.

And if there was anyone who understood the hell that was, it was Jack.

He knew it all too well.

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Buenos Aires, Argentina

Hannibal Lecter sauntered slowly down the hall to the nurses' station, pausing only briefly as he passed it.

"Everything all right, Elena?"

"Everything's fine, Dr. Jansson." Elena assured him with a smile, looking up from the chart she had been busily notating. "All quiet. No changes. I think it's safe to say you've had an easy shift."

"Don't jinx it!" Hannibal whispered teasingly, and Elena laughed. "Technically, I still have fifteen minutes left."

"Twenty. Dr. Perez just called - apparently he's running a few minutes late." She told him. "But even so, I doubt too much can happen before he gets here."

"You never know." Hannibal said as he began to move away. "Especially when it's a full moon tonight."

He heard Elena groan behind him as he slipped into the breakroom. "Don't remind me!"

A small, soft laugh escaped him then, and Hannibal paused, perplexed. Where had *that* come from? It wasn't as if he thought what Elena said was especially clever or funny (far from it). It was more that the strange, buzzing, bubbling sensation that had been slowly building inside him over the past few hours had finally reached a crescendo and he simply couldn't hold it back anymore. He frowned.

Was it…?

It had to be, he decided, plucking a mug from the cabinet and pouring himself a cup of coffee. How else was he supposed to explain the flutter in his stomach, the weightlessness that had propelled him through the last twelve hours of his shift, even his willingness to drink the emergency's room sludge when he had sworn he never would? What else but bliss could explain what was happening to him?

With a dreamy sigh, Hannibal drifted over to the table and chairs in the middle of the room and settled himself there, thinking.

For as long as he could remember, his emotions had always been painted in broad strokes - he was intimately familiar with the many shades of anger and disgust, had known satisfaction but never happiness, or joy, or euphoria. Some, like fear, anxiety, or sorrow, he didn't have at all. And though he didn't experience the full range or depth of emotions that most people had, what he did feel was enough to understand the concept and nuances of those he didn't. He had counseled enough people, had heard such feelings described again and again over the course of his career that he had learned to recognize them (and use them, and manipulate them) easily in others.

He just never expected to experience them for himself.

Hannibal smiled as he sipped his coffee, barely aware of the acrid taste, the distant, steady beeping of his patients' heart monitors, the occasional *squeak* of rubber soles against the polished, vinyl tile.

Do you believe you could change me the way I've changed you?

I already have .

If only he had known just how right Will was. If only he had understood then how much he needed him, what Will would do to him. He never would have left him then. Would never have wasted even a moment without him.

He would have fought harder for him. The way he should have.

…Still.

Hannibal couldn't exactly say he regretted what he'd done, how he handled things. Not when it had all worked out in the end. He and Will were together. That was all that mattered.

The only thing he did regret was the time together they had lost, the time they couldn't get back now. And if it were up to him, Hannibal would have spent every second of the rest of his life making up for it - he would have worshiped Will properly, the way he deserved to be, on beds of feather down and silk sheets, massaging perfumed oils into his alabaster skin, and feeding him only the finest of delicacies, the richest of wines. Days basking in the sun, caressing moonlit cheeks at night, poetry and love songs, operas and orchestras serenading them along the way…

But Will, maddening boy that he was, had insisted that they needed normalcy. That without it, such decadence would stagnate and eventually sour. So, ignoring Hannibal's protests, uncaring of the fact that they had more money than either of them knew what to do with, Will had found himself a job at the marina, where he spent three days a week repairing boats. And Hannibal, in an effort to keep himself distracted during those miserably long hours he had to be without him, had taken a part time job in the local emergency room…a position that had originally been intended for a Doctor Sten Jansson, a Swedish expatriate who had had the misfortune of being seated next to Hannibal and Will at the El Mercado one evening.

Perhaps it wouldn't have been so unfortunate if Jansson hadn't been drinking that night. Maybe if he hadn't, he wouldn't have been so forward. He would have known better than to tell Will he was pretty "despite that awful scar", and maybe, if he was sober, he would have taken it better when Will ignored him. Maybe he wouldn't have made the mistake of telling Will (in front of Hannibal) that it didn't matter that he was "a stuck-up little bitch", he would "still fuck him even if he didn't want him to"…

Such a shame, that. That his first night in Buenos Aires had also been his last.

Especially when he was supposed to be starting a new job that Monday...

Ah, well. Fate worked in mysterious ways, Hannibal supposed. And he had always been loath to let a perfectly good opportunity go to waste. Especially one as good as this, where he stood to gain so much.

He took Jansson's life, and everything that came with it, and, beyond the fact that that kill had been his last, Hannibal didn't give it too much thought.

Though he sometimes wondered, if he had known then that he would never kill again, if he would have savored the moment more than he did.

Probably.

But he found he didn't mind that he didn't. How was he supposed to know then what he did now? Especially when he didn't miss it, the thrill of the hunt. He had always thought he would, had always been convinced he couldn't possibly give it up, but he had, and easily. It all seemed so trivial now, now that he had other more important things to worry about. Now that he had Will.

…Will.

Hannibal smiled.

His great love, his missing piece, his better half. His world, his muse, his soulmate. The one he had been searching for, waiting for, for his entire life. His Will. What Hannibal wouldn't do to be with him now, just to hold him in his arms and look into his eyes. That he was expected to wait until that night to see him again seemed nothing short of torturous.

But then again…Will had always been such a merciless little thing, especially in his demands from Hannibal. He proved that last night, when he dropped Hannibal off at work, their bags piled in the trunk, the dog quiet in her crate. They had said goodbye, and as Hannibal was turning to get out, Will had suddenly grabbed him, pinning him in place as he leaned across the console and kissed him long and slow.

Cruel boy. He knew exactly what he was doing, the effect he had on Hannibal as he pressed against him with a moan. It was hard to believe this was the same Will who had once been so shy, so hesitant, to kiss him, who had blushed so deeply at every tender word Hannibal had spoken to him, who had learned to dole out his affection the way a child learned to walk - unsure and stumbling at first, but gaining strength each day by leaps and bounds. If Hannibal hadn't been there to witness the transformation for himself, he might never have believed this was the same man he had known before.

When they finally broke apart, Hannibal was gasping for breath. And when Will whispered in his ear, "Don't keep me waiting long", he had almost, *almost* , called off work…

Instead, he simply smiled. Kissed Will goodbye one last time and promised he'd see him soon. Because if there was one thing Hannibal knew without question, it was that some things, like wine, only got better with time. And he knew that the time and distance that separated him from Will now would only make their reunion that much sweeter in the end.

Still. Twelve hours was a long time to wait, especially when every minute seemed determined to drag as leisurely by as possible. The fact that it was such an usually quiet night only made it that much worse. Hannibal had spent the majority of his night alternating between sleeping in the on-call room, checking on his patients, and wishing for a catastrophe of some kind to keep him occupied.

It never happened.

The night passed uneventfully.

And rather than spend his abundance of free time stitching cuts, setting broken bones, or forcing failing hearts to beat, Hannibal dreamed of Will and all that he would do when he saw

him again. That his shift was only minutes from being over, that he was that much closer to seeing Will again, had him practically shivering and shaking with excitement and all but bursting with joy. He didn't even care that Dr. Perez was running late.

He was far too happy to be anything else.

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When Dr. Perez finally entered the breakroom, he did so with all the grace of a detonating bomb.

"...so sorry, Dr. Jansson. I completely forgot they were planning on repaving Avenida Acoyte today. I hope there wasn't any trouble while you were waiting for me."

"No trouble at all." Hannibal reassured him placidly, watching over the rim of his cup as he tossed his backpack onto the table beside him. "It's been a quiet night."

"That's good." Perez said distractedly, running his fingers through his hair in a desperate attempt to tame it before bustling over to the coffee maker. "I know you're leaving for vacation tonight, and I was so worried - oh *shit* !"

The bag had landed on the edge of the table, where it remained upright for all of two seconds before it slowly began to tip, and then topple over. Before Perez could catch it, the bag hit the floor and burst open, its contents scattering everywhere. Hannibal sipped his coffee as Perez dropped to his knees with a curse and began to gather up his belongings. In his rush to grab his falling bag, he had accidentally spilled his coffee - some of it on the floor, most of it on his shirt.

"God, can this day get any worse?" He groaned, shoving his things haphazardly back inside his bag.

“I’m sure it could get infinitely worse.” Hannibal informed him, leaning over and collecting some of the papers that were strewn at his feet. “Best not tempt providence.”

“I don’t see how.” Perez muttered, taking the papers Hannibal offered him. “Thank you.”

“Of course.” Hannibal said smoothly, bending down once more to retrieve the last of Perez’s things, the day’s copy of *La Nación,* “And I assure you, reality is often far more horrifying than anything…”

He trailed off then, as he picked up the newspaper and flipped it over, catching sight of the headline on the other side.

Manhunt Continues - Escaped Murderer Acosta Spotted Near Lake District !

Hannibal frowned and began to scan the article, wondering how much of it was true and how much was sensationalism. Beside him, Perez leaned over his shoulder, obviously curious about what had managed to capture his attention.

“Ah.” He said with a nod. “It’s crazy isn’t it? I can’t believe they still haven’t managed to catch him yet.”

“I’m not surprised.” Hannibal sighed, folding the paper shut and handing it back to him. “He’s very dangerous.”

“All the more reason to catch him!” Perez argued, struggling to close his overstuffed bag. “He killed eighteen women before they finally managed to catch him - how many is he going to kill before they catch him this time?”

“If he’s smart, he won’t kill anyone. The less police attention he draws to himself, the better.”

“Pfft. Well, he’s doing a great job so far. They say they’ve got all officers in San Carlos de Bariloche on standby. They’re even saying they might call in the National Gendarmerie. Place is locked down tighter than Fort Knox.” He paused then, as if he had just realized something. “Hey, aren’t you supposed to be going to the Lake District this weekend?”

“Yes, my boyfriend and I have a cabin there.”

“Maybe you should cancel. You know, wait until things calm down a bit. I’m sure the airline will refund your tickets.”

Hannibal shook his head. “My boyfriend’s been looking forward to this trip for weeks. There’s no way I could possibly convince him to cancel it now, escaped killer or not. He’s quite stubborn.” He heaved a long-suffering sigh. “And besides, he already flew down last night.”

“Oh. Yeah, I guess you have no choice then, huh? Especially if he’s already down there by himself.” A beat of awkward silence passed. “Ah, well.” He continued with forced cheer. “If there was ever a good time to go, it was now. You have to feel better knowing you’ll have such a strong police force present, right?”

“Yes, I feel safer already.” Hannibal drawled, not quite able to keep the sarcasm from creeping into his tone. Luckily, Perez didn’t seem to notice.

“Still, you guys be careful, alright?” He said, finally managing to zip his bag shut. “Better safe than sorry.”

“No doubt.”

Perez straightened, looping his pack over his shoulder and grabbing what was left of his coffee. “Alright. I’m officially taking over for you. Hurry and get out of here while you still can.”

“Thank you.” Hannibal said coolly, pushing himself to his feet in a single, fluid motion. “I’ll see you Wednesday.”

“Bye. Have a good trip!”

Hannibal waited until he had left the room before he allowed himself to smile. “Oh, I intend to.”

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The sunlight was dazzling compared to the fluorescent lights of the hospital, and Hannibal squinted as he stepped outside, momentarily blinded by the golden blaze. He blinked, trying to clear his vision, and when his eyes finally adjusted, he couldn’t help but pause, enchanted by the scene before him - the rows of pink lapacho trees that lined the streets of Buenos Aires, the heady smell of their delicate blossoms, the bustling crowds that swarmed around him, the soft strumming of a faraway guitar…

He sighed.

When Will had first suggested Buenos Aires, he had been surprised. It didn’t seem like Will, like something he would want, and Hannibal had been hesitant to bring him there, worried that he would eventually come to regret his decision, or worse, that he would resent Hannibal for agreeing to it…

But it seemed his fears were unfounded - Will had taken to the city and the sunshine with an ease that Hannibal had not expected. He was calmer now, happier, and it delighted Hannibal to no end that there appeared to be no end in sight, that even though they had been calling this city home for over a year now, each new day still felt as magical as their first, as if they had somehow tripped into a fairytale.

Once upon a time, there was a beautiful but tortured prince and a terrible but lonely monster…

…and they lived happily ever after.

Together.

How they had gotten so lucky, Hannibal didn't know and didn't particularly care.

It didn't matter.

Humming softly to himself, Hannibal set off down the street, slipping quietly into the sea of people and disappearing almost instantly among them.

He had a few hours before his flight, and there were things he still needed to do before then.

The first thing he needed to do was find himself a decent breakfast. Something to wash away the foul aftertaste of the hospital's instant coffee, which still hung heavy on his tongue, impossible to ignore.

Luckily, he didn't have to look very hard or very long before he found a small cafe tucked cozily between the busy storefronts. He was seated right away, at a table beside the window, and as he sipped his cortado, Hannibal's dark eyes flitted back and forth across the bistro. He watched as a couple strolled arm-in-arm out the door and down the street, as the waiter darted back and forth between tables, as an elderly man seated at the counter lifted his coffee with shaking, arthritic hands…

"…checkpoints set up all over, that's what I heard. No one's getting in or out of there without the police's say-so. Trust me, they'll have him again before the weekend's over."

“Oh, I hope so. I can’t take much more of this - I mean, just knowing that he’s out there, somewhere-”

Hannibal turned, however slightly, cocking his head to hear better. At a booth just a few feet away, two women sat with their heads bent close together, whispering to one another.

“I’m just glad they’re finally doing something about it. I mean, it’s been *weeks* since Acosta escaped.”

“You know why it’s taken them so long, don’t you?”

“I thought it was because they were afraid of him.”

“Oh, they are. They’re terrified. I mean, after what he did to that guard and all those women, who wouldn’t be? But, no, it’s way more than that.”

“So then, why? What are they waiting for?”

“They were hoping *he’d* take care of him.”

“Who?”

“The Angel.”

A pause.

And then a snort.

“Oh, come on. Everyone knows that’s just a myth. The chief of police even said so at that press conference-”

“They only said that to save face. Apparently, some big shot at the FBI contacted them about it. Said it looked like the Angel might be a serial killer and offered to help but they said no - the chief took it as an insult.”

“How is *that* an insult? He was just offering to help.”

“You know how proud the chief is. I’ll bet he thought the FBI was implying that he didn’t know how to do his job.”

“Oh, for God’s sake.”

“Yeah, well. He turned him down, made a big show of saying the Angel wasn’t real and that the FBI doesn’t know what they’re talking about. Looks like the chief’s managed to dig himself quite the hole this time.”

“Please. The Angel’s not real. I’ve heard there wasn’t any evidence at any of the crime scenes.”

“There wasn’t! That’s the thing! They’ve got absolutely nothing to go on and they’ve turned down the one person who could help them. They don’t know what to do!”

“That’s impossible! If the Angel was real, he would have to leave behind *something* -!”

“It’s not impossible! Miguel told me so!”

“Miguel doesn’t know anything! He’s just a cadet! He’s only saying that so you’ll sleep with him.”

“No, honest! He swears the Angel of Death is really out there and that whatever it is, it isn’t human-”

There was movement in his periphery, and Hannibal whipped his head around with a glare. His waiter jumped back, his smile faltering when he saw the look on his face, but he recovered quickly.

“Eggs Florentine!” He announced, setting the plate down with a flourish. “With a side of fresh fruit drizzled in honey.” He hesitated, only for a moment, and Hannibal could smell his unease. “Is there anything else I can get you, Sir?”

Hannibal shook his head, and offered him his most charming smile. “No, thank you. This looks incredible.”

The waiter dipped his head before scurrying quickly away. “Enjoy!”

After he had paid his bill, Hannibal cut through the Plaza de Mayo to his favorite jeweler. He had called Hannibal a few days ago to tell him that his order was finally ready, and it had taken every ounce of his self-control to wait as long as he did to pick it up.

The shop’s bell rang cheerfully overhead as Hannibal stepped inside. From behind the front desk, where he was busy repairing a gentleman’s watch, Ernesto waved to him.

“I’ll be with you shortly, Doctor Jansson!” He called.”Just give me one moment!”

“Take your time.” Hannibal told him, maneuvering carefully around a woman in a leopard print dress who was bent languidly over one of the display cases and moving to admire an antique grandfather clock in the corner. “I’m in no hurry.”

True to his word, Ernesto didn’t keep him waiting long. As he finished with the watch and was bidding his customer goodbye, he motioned for Hannibal to come forward -

Only for the woman in the leopard print dress to push suddenly in front of him.

“I was here before *this* person.” She told Ernesto, shooting Hannibal a dirty look over her shoulder. “I believe that means I’m next.”

A beat of embarrassed silence passed as Ernesto looked helplessly between them.

Then Hannibal bowed his head. “Of course, Madam.” He said, taking a small step back. “I apologize. I didn’t realize you were in line.”

“Hmph!” She huffed, tossing her head and turning back around. “I want to see those emerald earrings.” She said, pointing imperiously to the display case she had been standing in front of a minute ago.

“Of course.” Ernesto said, bustling over to fetch them. “Right away.”

“And that gold chain.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She took her time examining the different pieces, criticizing each before demanding to see eight others. To his credit, Ernesto did his best to hurry her along, and after she finally left

(refusing to buy anything), he turned to Hannibal sheepishly.

“I’m so sorry, Dr. Jansson.” He moaned, bending down and rummaging under his counter. “I didn’t realize she would take so long.”

“It’s no trouble.” Hannibal assured him with an airy wave of his hand. “I’m just happy she’s gone.”

“Me too.” Ernesto said before straightening up again with a grin and holding out a small, velvet box toward Hannibal. “Ta da! Here it is!”

Hannibal hesitated, and with shaking hands, reached out and took the little box from him. He fumbled with the clasp, and when he managed to get it undone and the lid lifted, he couldn’t help but gasp.

Nestled inside was a tungsten ring, inlaid with a thin band of small, black diamonds and edged in rose gold. Inscribed on the inside, in elegant, curling letters was the word ‘ *Mylimasis* ’.

“Oh!” Hannibal sighed, lifting a finger to delicately touch it, hardly daring to believe that something he had only once envisioned could suddenly be real. “It’s beautiful!”

“You like it?” Ernesto asked, wringing his hands and watching him closely. “I wasn’t sure if the band was too thick-”

“No, it’s perfect.” Hannibal told him, closing the box again and holding out his hand. “Ernesto, you’ve truly outdone yourself this time. It’s everything I imagined it would be and more.”

The jeweler beamed. “It’s been a pleasure working with you, Dr. Jansson.” He said sincerely as he shook his hand. “If there’s ever anything else I can do for you, please don’t hesitate to ask.”

“Oh, I won’t.” Hannibal said with a small smile. “After all, I’m going to need a matching wedding band in a few months, and there’s no one else I would trust to make it besides you.”

“Really? Only a few months?” Ernesto asked as he handed Hannibal his receipt. “When are you planning to propose?”

“This weekend.”

“Ah! So soon! Are you nervous?”

“Not at all.” Hannibal said, his smile widening. “I know he’ll say yes.”

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The plane ride from Buenos Aires to San Carlos de Bariloche was less than three hours, and it still somehow felt like the longest flight of Hannibal’s entire life. Between being impatient to see Will and the fact that the backpacker beside him had removed his shoes and socks as soon as they reached cruising altitude, Hannibal was more than eager for it to be over.

It felt like forever before they finally touched down.

—-------

Will wasn’t there to pick him up, but Hannibal knew he wouldn’t be - he needed to purchase a few things for their time at the cabin anyway, and the last thing he wanted was to drag Will away from the fish.

He picked up his rental car without issue and was detained at a police security checkpoint as soon as he pulled out of the airport parking lot. He had to bite back a sigh as the officer frowned down at his passport, turning it this way and that in the light.

“You’re American?” The man grunted, handing the document back to him. “You don’t sound like one.”

“I was born in Russia.” Hannibal explained. “I immigrated to America when I was in my twenties.”

“Hmm. Well, enjoy your stay. Be sure to lock your doors and windows at night and if you have any questions or concerns, please give us a call.”

“Thank you, officer.” Hannibal said, shifting gears. “I’ll be sure to.”

—-------

Night had fallen by the time Hannibal pulled up to the cabin. Though it was a full moon, the silver glow was lost behind the thick cloud cover overhead, and the darkness prevailed. If it weren’t for the soft golden light in the cabin window, it would have been almost impossible for Hannibal to navigate the few feet between the car and the house.

The door was unlocked when he pushed against it.

“Will?” He called out, his heart fluttering eagerly as he set his bags on the kitchen counter. “Darling, I’m home! Where are you?”

The only answer he received was a high-pitched whine, and turning, he found Zora slowly uncurling herself from her spot on the couch. She padded over to Hannibal, wagging her tail forlornly.

“Hello, Zora.” Hannibal said softly, bending down to stroke her black, leathery skin. “Where’s Will, hmm? Where’s he gone? Is he here?”

Zora nudged him with her nose and whined again. Hannibal sighed. “Don’t worry,” He told her, straightening again. “I’m sure he’ll be back soon. He would never leave you.”

He wouldn’t, either. Will had adored Zora from the moment Hannibal had given her to him last Christmas. If she was here and he wasn’t, it was clearly because Will had thought she would be safer at the house than with him, and Hannibal was sure he wouldn’t have left her alone for very long. He would probably be back at any moment.

With this in mind, Hannibal turned back toward the kitchen and began to put away his purchases, Zora trailing behind him. She watched him hopefully as he unwrapped a package of raw beef, and whimpered as he began to slice it into long, thin strips. Hannibal frowned at her.

“Stop that.” He scolded her teasingly as she cocked her head at him. “Honestly. You act as if Will never feeds you. Go on, go sit.”

Zora remained where she was, her tail wagging back and forth behind her. Hannibal sighed, and tossed her a piece of meat.

If someone had told Hannibal two years ago that he would be talking to a dog as if it were a person, he would have killed them and then would have done everything in his power to never cross paths with any animal ever again. But he supposed that was unrealistic - he had always known, however begrudgingly, that Will would eventually end up with a dog. And that he would be powerless to tell him ‘no’ when he finally brought one home. So rather than sit back and wait for Will to find some flea-infested, disease-carrying mutt, Hannibal had bitten the bullet and bought him a purebred, hairless one. At least that way, they both got what they wanted, however reluctantly on Hannibal’s part.

Still.

Just seeing the look on Will's face when he handed her to him had made it worth it in the end.

"What should we call her?" Will had asked, cradling the puppy close.

Hannibal thought for a moment. "Anubis?"

"No!"

"Why not? She looks exactly like him."

"We're not naming her after the Egyptian god of death." Will had said, rolling his eyes, before he then suggested 'Duchess'.

"Look at how she walks." He'd explained, nodding his head at Zora's delicate legs. "She's so graceful!"

But Hannibal had rejected the idea, reminding Will that he was technically a count, and saying that he refused to be outranked by a dog, much to Will's exasperation.

They debated back and forth for a while before Hannibal had finally proposed 'Zora'.

"It means 'dawn'." He had explained, reaching out and tucking a stray curl back behind Will's ear. "New beginnings."

Will had smiled at him. "I like it."

“I do too.”

And so Zora was.

_____

Hannibal was nearly done making dinner when Zora’s large, bat ears suddenly swiveled on her head and she abruptly sat up, looking toward the cabin’s front door. Hannibal glanced down at her.

“What is it?” He asked, stirring the sauce as it simmered on the stove. “Do you hear Will? Is he coming?”

Zora ignored him, and began to pace anxiously back and forth across the kitchen tile, her tail tucked between her legs. Hannibal frowned.

“Zora?” He called, trying to get her attention. “What is it, girl? What’s wrong?”

Of course she didn’t answer him, and of course Hannibal didn’t expect her to...

But he also didn’t expect the hair-raising shriek that erupted suddenly from the woods just beyond the house and echoed hauntingly through the night.

Hannibal looked over at the front door sharply, his eyes narrowed. Whatever it was, it was close.

Too close.

Which meant that whatever was tormenting it wasn't far behind…

Hannibal grabbed his knife and strode quickly to the door, Zora trotting closely after him. He paused for just a moment, straining to hear anything beyond the thick wood slab, and when the scream rang out again, he yanked it open, holding the knife tightly at his side.

The moon had finally emerged from behind the clouds, bathing the clearing in its strange, otherworldly glow. Hannibal's eyes slid slowly back and forth, looking for any hint of movement among the shadows -

A rustle of leaves and Hannibal jerked around in time to see a man come bursting wildly from the brush in front of him. Hannibal snarled silently and raised the knife, watching as the stranger struggled forward. He seemed to stumble on something in the undergrowth, and suddenly went crashing to the ground just feet from where Hannibal stood.

Zora whimpered from behind him.

Hannibal cocked his head.

The man was dressed in a torn and filthy prison jumpsuit. His breathing was ragged, as if he had been running all night, and his hair was matted with leaves and mud. And though it was hard to tell for sure, he seemed to be covered in blood.

…Interesting.

After a few moments, the man raised his head, staring pleadingly up at Hannibal.

"P-please!" He cried, crawling toward him. "You have to help me, please!"

“I know you.” Hannibal said softly, his head still tilted to the side. “You’re that escaped convict - Fanuco Acosta.”

“Yes!” The man gasped, inching closer to Hannibal. “Yes!”

“You’re quite the talk around town.” Hannibal informed him. “The police are looking everywhere for you, you know.”

“Yes!” The man said, fingers scrabbling at Hannibal’s shoes. Each and every one appeared bent unnaturally out of shape. “The police! Call the police! For the love of God, I beg you!”

“Why? Are you in some kind of trouble?”

“He’s after me!”

“Who is?” Hannibal asked patiently, amused.

But before Acosta could answer, a second figure suddenly appeared, emerging silently from the surrounding darkness and stepping slowly into the pale moonlight.

Acosta screamed, cowering at Hannibal’s feet.

“Save me! Save me! He’s going to kill me!”

Hannibal ignored him, staring adoringly at the man before him.

His face and curls and hands were smeared with blood so dark it almost appeared black, and glinting between his fingers was a large and wickedly curved knife…

From the corner of his eye, Hannibal could see Zora’s tail wagging.

He grinned.

“Hello, Will.”

Very slowly, as if waking from a dream, Will lifted his head and looked at Hannibal.

He smiled.

His teeth were red.

“Hello, Hannibal.”

Acosta wailed.

Chapter End Notes

THIS. WAS. SO. FUCKING. HARD. TO. WRITE.

Will gets a dog....check.

Hannibal is a hopelessly romantic simp....check.

Hannibal and Will living happily ever after...check

For anyone who's interested to see what Zora looks like, google "black xolo dog".

Author's Note

Background : This story was inspired in part by a dream I had back in February. In the dream, Hannibal and Will were stranded in a cabin in the middle of nowhere during a bad snowstorm. While they were there, Will was very sick and was hallucinating that there was a woman creeping around inside the walls (It was all very “The Yellow Wallpaper”). Originally, I had planned to write this story as a oneshot of that, but not long after the dream, I found an interview with Bryan Fuller, who said that if they got the chance to do Season 4 of *Hannibal* , he would like to bring some of the dead characters back and that it would be reminiscent of Season 1 (I.E., Will seeing things that weren’t really there). And with that, this story was born.

Mostly, I wanted to explore what exactly happened to Will after the events of the series finale. *Hannibal* is, in essence, the story of a man grappling with the darkness inside him, and throughout the show, Hannibal tries to help Will not only accept that darkness, but to embrace it in its entirely, and we slowly see Will become more comfortable with who he is over the course of the show.

However, after they kill Dolarhyde, and Hannibal tells Will that “this was all I ever wanted for you, for both of us”, Will responds with “It’s beautiful.” And it’s only after that, after Will realizes what’s happened, and the fact that he truly does appreciate the beauty of what they’ve done, that he pulls them over the side of the cliff - he would rather die than allow himself to live like Hannibal, as a monster. Which means a part of Will was still resistant to the darkness inside him.

This story was essentially meant to show what happened after the events of the finale, and to answer whether or not Will would ever accept the darkness inside him.

Possible Explanations : I personally love stories that are open to interpretation, which is what I wanted to accomplish with this story. Throughout writing it, I tried to throw in as many things as possible to keep people guessing just what the hell was happening, and to be honest, there is no right answer. I think you could argue for three main possibilities, and all three could be correct.

- Hannibal is Drugging Will - one of the things I love about Hannibal is how diabolical he is. You never quite know what he's doing or what his motivations are, and I wanted to make people think from very early on that Hannibal was manipulating Will. His Gladstone bag first appeared in Chapter 4, and I tried to reference it as many times as possible throughout the story. I wanted to make it clear to people that Hannibal had a magical bag of drugs and medical equipment at his disposal, and that no one could be sure that he was using it the way he said he was.

- Will has Schizophrenia - In the show, they make a very brief reference to Will's mother. I think the exact words he used were "I never knew her". What exactly this means could either be interpreted as she abandoned him (which is what I always personally thought) or that she died when he was very young. For drama's sake, I went with the "dead" route, and then I took it a step further by making her schizophrenic. As part of the story, I wanted people to believe that Will might actually be crazy, and I thought giving him a genetic predisposition would help. I think for schizophrenia, it usually emerges in the teens/early twenties, but from what I understand, it can manifest at any time. I also thought it would add to the horror of the story - the idea that at any given moment, a person's grip on reality could suddenly vanish and they might not even know it.

- It's real - one of the things I had fun with was adding snippets of information that I hoped would make the reader think what was happening was real. For example, the Woman in White seems to know things that Will doesn't (She first appears rummaging through his wardrobe as if she's looking for something, and the next day Will learns about the secret compartment. Later, she makes a big show of getting Will to come into Chiyoh's room and it's only then that he discovers her gun. And finally, she wails the day before Will learns Hannibal lied to him, foreshadowing tragedy). Additionally, I used Nadine to suggest that it wasn't just Will who was experiencing the spirits - that someone else could see and hear them too. However, I also tried to keep the things Nadine said vague enough that you couldn't really take what she said too seriously.

So, like I said, I think these three theories are the best to explain what's happening, and again, there is no one "right" answer. I wanted to leave it up to you guys to decide what was happening. If anyone has any other theories, I'd love to hear them!

The Ghosts :

1. The Buck - I read somewhere that the Ravenstag that appears in *Hannibal* symbolizes the connection between Will and Hannibal. With that in mind, I created a yearling buck who appeared periodically throughout the story, and who annoys Will with its 'mating calls' late at night. It's meant to symbolize their "young love".

1. Beverly - represents the part of Will that still resents/distrusts Hannibal, the part of him that is still good. She mostly appears whenever Will is getting too close to Hannibal, and when she does appear it's to remind him what Hannibal is and all the bad things he's done.

1. Abigail - represents the part of Will who loves Hannibal and wants to be with him. She usually appears whenever Will starts to doubt Hannibal, and reminds him that Will loves him and that Hannibal loves him.

1. Bedelia - this one's kind of hard to explain, so bear with me. Bedelia only appears once in this story - right after Will tries to leave Hannibal in Chapter 4. She stays with Will as he drives around New Orleans trying to decide what to do, but she doesn't speak to him at all during that time. In fact, she seems impatient and bored with him and what he's doing. It's only once Will visits his last childhood home and sees that it's destroyed that Bedelia speaks. She essentially tells him that he is not the same person he once was and can't go back to who he used to be. She reminds him that he's not innocent, and that he and Hannibal are more alike than he cares to admit. She doesn't try to persuade Will to stay with Hannibal or to leave him. Her role is instead to help Will understand that no matter what he chooses, he can't go back to the person he once was, and that he needs to accept that he's not the same person he used to be.

1. The Woman in White/Caroline Graham - The first and last ghost who appears, represents Will's dark side. She takes the form of Will's mother, who had schizophrenia and tried to kill him when he was a baby. Throughout the story, WIll is terrified not only that he may end up like his mother, but he might eventually go darkside and lose himself completely. Caroline usually appears when Will is at his most vulnerable (but I tried to make it clear that she's kind of always "around" even if you don't see/hear her), and she really only speaks the last time Will sees her, telling him that a little bit of crazy isn't a bad thing, and that it's actually necessary if someone hopes to survive in this world. Additionally, in her final appearance, she appears to him as beautiful, with her hair combed and fixed, and her demeanor calm and collected. It's essentially supposed to represent the fact that Will has fully accepted himself, and is no longer afraid of it.

Miscellaneous :

- Chapter titles are lyrics from Ella Henderson's song *Ghost*. It's one of my favorites and I think it fits Will well.

- Nadine - Nadine was originally meant to play a much smaller role in the story, but as it continued, she became much more important. If Hannibal is supposed to be the Devil on Will's shoulder, Nadine is supposed to be the Angel on the other, trying to coax him back to the light. She is everything Hannibal isn't: she's a woman, he's a man. She's poor, he's disgustingly rich. He's very worldly, whereas she is only concerned about her own community. She is very spiritual and deeply believes in God and Hannibal mocks religion every chance he gets. Hannibal is very selfish while she cares deeply for others and is involved with charity. But the most important difference is that like Hannibal, Nadine has suffered hardship, but unlike him, it made her kind instead of cruel. The moment she died, any chance of Will being saved was lost.

- Will and Hannibal's love: obviously, it is NOT HEALTHY I CANNOT STRESS THIS ENOUGH. For every cute/sweet moment in the story, I tried to make it so that there was an equally horrifying/toxic one to balance it out.

- Chapter 17 ends with Will waking up on his birthday. He's essentially "reborn" at the end of the story.

- In the epilogue, Will and Hannibal have traded roles. Hannibal is no longer a killer and has completely given up murdering people - it was ultimately Will who managed to stop the Chesapeake Ripper. At the same time, Will has gone full darkside, just like Hannibal always wanted, and has become an even more ruthless killer than Hannibal was. Unlike Hannibal, however, who only ever killed the rude or those who posed some kind of threat to him, Will's preferred victim is strictly other killers.

- I wanted to incorporate Jack/the FBI in the epilogue as a comparison to Will and Hannibal. We see Jack and Alana are very unhappy and very jaded after everything that's happened. They are no longer friends and their lives seem very bleak. And then we see Will and Hannibal in sunny, gorgeous Buenos Aires living their best lives and hopelessly, sickeningly in love with one another. It was just meant to show that even if Will had chosen the FBI over Hannibal, he would never have been happy and would most likely be just as miserable as they were.

- So, I know Bryan Fuller said if he was going to do Season 4, it would take place in Cuba, but in the books, Hannibal and Clarice end up in Buenos Aires, and after researching it a little, and seeing Patagonia and the Lake District, I thought it felt more like Will. Please don't hate me for it!

I think that’s everything. Please let me know if there’s anything I didn’t answer, or if you have any other questions for me.

As always, thank you all so, so much for reading! I honest to God could not have finished this without you!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!